

LORD SCATTERBRAIN

BY W. STEPHENS HAYWARD



AUTHOR OF "THE BLACK ANGEL."

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LORD SCATTERBRAIN ;

OR,

THE ROUGH DIAMOND POLISHED.

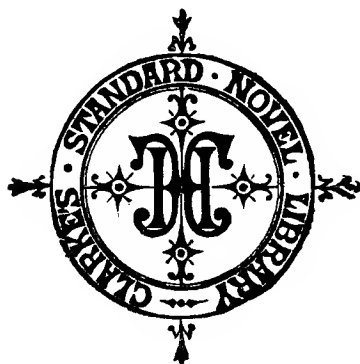
BY

W. STEPHENS HAYWARD,

AUTHOR OF

"THE BLACK ANGEL," "THE STAR OF THE SOUTH,"

"THE FIERY CROSS," ETC. ETC.



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CONTENTS.

CHAP.	PAGE.
I.—The Reader is introduced to Lord Scatterbrain and others	1
II.—The County Beauties. Lady Jane and Florence Grey... ..	7
III.—An Amicable Law-suit	12
IV.—Lord Scatterbrain	18
V.—Florence Grey blows her Silver Bagle	23
VI.—A Check and a runaway Horse	29
VII.—Lord Scatterbrain to the Rescue	34
VIII.—A Fracas prevented	40
IX.—An Invitation accepted	44
X.—Pleasant Days at Woodford Grange	47
XI.—Girlish Confidences	54
XII.—News of King Lambton	58
XIII.—A Hunting Morning	66
XIV.—A Sporting Bet... ..	70
XV.—Master Jack and Miss Florence	74
XVI.—A Railway Flirtation	79
XVII.—The little Prima Donna	84
XVIII.—Mr. Graham makes a Move	88
XIX.—Operatic Negotiations	93
XX.—A Money-lender in Love	98
XXI.—For once Mr. Graham speaks his Mind	102
XXII.—Mr. Leroy makes a Resolution	106
XXIII.—Pheasant or no Pheasant	110
XXIV.—Phelim O'Rourke	114
XXV.—Mr. Graham takes stock of Lord Scatterbrain... ..	118
XXVI.—Florence speaks out	122
XXVII.—Florence proposes to turn Money-lender	126
XXVIII.—Mr. Graham and Lord Scatterbrain come to close quarters... ..	129

CONTENTS.

CHAP.	PAGE.
XXIX.—An important Communication ...	133
XXX.—Arrival at Myrtle Cottage ...	137
XXXI.—Fulford takes Miss Knight for a Drive ...	140
XXXII.—Susie Knight—A real Love Romance ...	144
XXXIII.—Billiards—high Stakes ...	154
XXXIV.—Deus ex Machina ...	159
XXXV.—Scatterbrain and Susie Knight ...	164
XXXVI.—Two Thousand Pounds! ...	170
XXXVII.—Graham proposes a Compact to Leroy ...	175
XXXVIII.—The Dinner Party at Woodford Grange ...	179
XXXIX.—Lord Scatterbrain's Watch ...	184
XL.—Bad News from Myrtle Cottage ...	189
XLI.—Breaking Sad News ...	196
XLII.—Never contradict a Woman ...	201
XLIII.—Private and Confidential ...	206
XLIV.—Mr. Graham has Business to transact ...	211
XLV.—Jack and Susie ...	215
XLVI.—Susie becomes a Landowner ...	219
XLVII.—Purely a Business One ...	223
XLVIII.—A Delicate Subject ...	227
XLIX.—Master of the Situation ...	231
L.—The Ladies in the Drawing-room ...	235
LI.—Mr. Graham's Law ...	239
LII.—The Guardians ...	244
LIII.—Independence ...	252
LIV.—Thrown on the World ...	254
LV.—Scatterbrain Abroad ...	257
LVI.—Mickey Doolan's blunder ...	264
LVII.—The Fancy Ball ...	275
LVIII.—The Diplomatic Journey ...	285
LIX.—Captain Saunders ...	289
LX.—A Strange Adventure ...	296
LXI.—A Mystery ...	311
LXII.—The Explanation of the Mystery ...	320
LXIII.—Lady Jane's Death ...	332
LXIV.—King Lambton falls in Love ...	337
LXV.—The New Star ...	353

LORD SCATTERBRAIN.

CHAPTER I.

THE READER IS INTRODUCED TO LORD SCATTERBRAIN
AND OTHERS.

AN English cover-side, on a muggy November morning, just such a day as to give prospect of a keen scent and a good run.

And of this the assembled sportsmen and sportswomen (for there were several ladies present) have well grounded hopes.

There was no other covert for which a fox found and started from this one, called Bamford Copse, could make—nearer than eleven miles as the crow flies—bar some thickets and a plantation or two, where, however, the earths were stopped, and hunted Reynard could not hope to baffle the hounds with anything like a good scent.

And it was almost certain that there was at least one big dog fox in Bamford Copse.

The country was pretty nearly all that could be desired for a rattling run at the heels of a strong fox.

It was not nearly all grass, as some parts of Leicestershire and Warwickshire, but there was a good proportion of pasture, mostly small meadows with fences, stiff, and yet not of a desperately break-neck nature.

The arable land, too, was of a light character, and some of it was as good going as the grass.

So that, altogether, with nearly the certainty of finding a fox and every sign of a good scent, the sportsmen assembled around Bamford Copse, had every reason to expect a rattling good day of it.

We will first call the reader's attention to a group of three gentlemen and two ladies, all well mounted, and with every appearance of good birth and breeding.

"And is that the mysterious stranger of whom we had heard so much and hitherto seen nothing?" asked Lady Jane Vavasour, a beautiful blonde, with a shower of golden hair falling over her shoulders—for as though conscious of this glorious possession, she scorned to confine it by plaits, net, or any other device. "Is that the Irish peer, Lord Scatterbrain, born and brought up in a mud cabin, and now possessor of an ancient title and vast estates?"

"That is Lord Scatterbrain," replied Captain Maitland, with a laugh—"What do you think of him, Lady Jane?"

"Well, that is hardly a fair question. In the first place, I have no means whatever of judging as to his conversational abilities, or as to what amount of polish he may have been able to obtain during the last two or three years. And then, as to his personal appearance—why he is fully thirty yards away from us."

"But you can perceive at that distance that he sits his horse like a bumpkin," pursued Captain Maitland, twirling his heavy black moustache.

"Yes, or like a boy at a fair on a merry-go-round wooden horse."

"Or a clodhopper swinging on a gate," remarked another.

"Now, Mr. Dandy Donn," said the Lady Jane Vavasour, "I won't hear the absent abused in this unfair and reckless manner. I declare I saw you fall off at a bit of a stile the other day, and I don't believe this Lord Scatterbrain would do that."

"Young lady," replied Mr. Daniel Donn, known familiarly as Dan Donn, more frequently from his foppish propensities, as Dandy Donn, "You have no means of judging."

"I beg your pardon there," cried the young lady, vivaciously, "I have some means of judging. I happened to turn into Burnot Lane this morning, just behind this Lord Scatterbrain, whom I did not know, even by sight. He had a friend with him, and they both rode at the

gate half way down the lane, and cleared it easily, thereby saving at least a mile, and having soft turf instead of a hard road for their horses' feet. I must bear witness to the fact, that Lord Scatterbrain went over in capital style."

"Are you sure it was Lord Scatterbrain," asked Captain Maitland.

"I am sure it was that gentleman yonder on the grey, whom you have just now pointed out to me as Lord Scatterbrain. I recognised the horse also."

"Ah well," replied Captain Maitland, who for some reason or another was bent on disparaging the Irish peer with the romantic history, "it is only an ignorant bumpkin who would ride his horse at a gate going to cover. No true sportsman would dream of such a thing. He only did it to show off, knowing there was a lady close behind him."

"Indeed I don't agree with you, Captain Maitland," cried the young lady, colouring up, for she did not like being contradicted; "I think it was very good judgment on his part, and I will give you good reason for my words. My groom, who was some fifty yards behind me, lamed his horse by getting a stone in his hoof further up that abominable lane, and I had to ride on alone. Now you see, Lord Scatterbrain and his friend not only avoided the possibility of such a thing happening to their horses, but made a short cut, and had turf to ride over, besides—"

"Why Jane, you look quite excited," said Colonel Vavasour, who at that moment joined the group.

"Lady Jane Vavasour is championing this new arrival amongst us, Lord Scatterbrain, and evidently considers him quite a hero of romance, because he did not learn to read till after he was of age," said Captain Maitland, sneeringly.

"Indeed, uncle," cried the young lady, "it is nothing of the kind. It is only Captain Maitland's ill-nature that makes him say so. We were speaking of this Lord Scatterbrain, and I merely remarked that, at all events, he could ride, for I saw him take a five-barred gate, and he did not fall off like Mr. Donn here, nor did his horse

run away with him, as was the case with Captain Maitland the other day."

"That was the fault of my confounded groom," said the captain hurriedly, "he knew the mare was hot and hard of mouth, and sent her out with a snaffle bridle."

"Ah," said the Lady Jane Vavasour, now enjoying a bit of a triumph over the captain, "I always look to that sort of thing myself, always see the bit and bridle are all right, and the girths tight enough."

"Every one is not such a distinguished Amazon and huntress as Lady Jane," replied the captain, bowing with mock humility, "the Diana of the country."

"And every one is not so ill-natured as Captain Maitland, thank Heaven," retorted the lady "I do believe you are envious of Lord Scatterbrain, because he is a peer, and has a fine property."

"Envious of such an uneducated, unpolished bumpkin, as that," cried Maitland, with a scornful laugh, "it is too absurd."

Nevertheless, he was a good deal annoyed, for the lady had hit him hard.

"Well, well," remarked Colonel Vavasour, "from what I hear it is not the young fellow's fault, rather his misfortune, that he is uneducated. Who knows that he may not be capable of being polished up?"

"A very rough diamond at present," remarked Maitland.

"Some stones are so naturally coarse and common that no amount of polish will make them ever appear valuable," said the lady.

"I should imagine Lord Scatterbrain was one of these latter, by the look of him," replied Captain Maitland.

"Well, here he comes," said the colonel, "who is it with him?"

Lord Scatterbrain was now seen approaching, accompanied by a singularly handsome young man, mounted on a chesnut throughbred.

The other lady now spoke.

"That is Captain Jack Fulford, my cousin," she said.

"Captain Fulford—Fulford—let me see—what regiment?" said Maitland, "never heard the name."

"Late of the 50th," replied Miss Florence Grey, the last speaker, hastily, and colouring up.

"Oh, ah, a line man. I thought I had not met him," said Captain Maitland, who belonged to a crack dragoon regiment.

"One of the oldest families in the country, with a fine estate here and another in Ireland," remarked Colonel Vavasour.

"Ireland—oh! ah! that is probably where he picked up with this mushroom lord."

"By no means a mushroom lord. It is true accident kept him in ignorance of his birth till lately, but the Scatterbrain peerage is far from being of modern date."

At this moment the two horsemen, the subject of this conversation approached, and no more was said.

Captain Fulford, always called Jack Fulford by his intimates, proceeded with easy grace to introduce Lord Scatterbrain; first to the ladies, then to Colonel Vavasour and the other gentlemen.

The peer with the strange history was of course regarded with some curiosity, especially by the ladies.

He appeared a well built stalwart young man, about twenty-five years of age, and was by no means ill-looking.

Fair, with light curling hair, blue eyes, and a good humoured face, with tolerably regular feature, he might even have been called handsome, but for a certain expression of awkwardness almost amounting to stupidity.

His features were not cast in the aristocratic mould, the nose being the reverse of aquiline, the mouth never having been trained to that look of proud superciliousness which so many men of noble birth think indispensable.

But Lord Scatterbrain was by no means clumsy or boorish. If he did not sit his horse with that grace to be acquired only at the riding-school, any one could tell that his seat was firm, and that he had a good grip with his knees.

He bowed as he was introduced to each in turn, and muttered a few words to the ladies.

Had he said no more, and done nothing, he might have passed muster very well at this his first introduction to some of the best people of the hunt.

But Jack Fulford, wishing to put him at his ease, took an unfortunate method of doing so.

"Scatterbrain, you have your flask with you, have you not? If I remember rightly, you filled it with some of that old cognac and water."

"Oh, yes!—capital stuff it is, too," replied his lordship, taking a small silver pouch from his breast-pocket.

"You must get me some, or tell me where to order it."

Now this speech was all right—no one could find fault with the grammar, though there was a perceptible brogue.

But when Jack Fulford handed his Irish friend the flask back, after taking a few sips, saying—

"A raw morning like this, a little drop of good cognac keeps the fog out of one's throat."

"Are you sure that is the only reason why you take it, Captain Fulford?" asked Lady Jane Vavasour, smiling, "I have heard our old groom, Bob, talk about 'Dutch courage' and 'jumping powder.'"

As the lady spoke, she cast her eyes significantly on the flask, adding—

"You are sure it is not pure brandy, Lord Scatterbrain—that there is at least some water with it?"

"Oh, yes!—faith! it's nearly half water," was the reply. "I assure you it's a capital thing to keep the fog out of one's throat, as my friend says. Ah! now let me offer you some—it's really first-rate, I assure you."

And, with the words, he unscrewed the top, and handed the brandy-flask to her.

Lady Jane stared, then coloured up, then burst out laughing in his face, and turned her horse away.

Poor Scatterbrain! he had unwittingly committed a terrible solecism.

The idea of a lady drinking brandy from a flask.

He turned crimson, and looked as he felt, a perfect fool.

CHAPTER II.

THE COUNTY BEAUTIES. LADY JANE AND FLORENCE GREY.

WE will devote this chapter to some explanation as to the various persons already introduced to the reader—their appearance, characters, and relations to each other.

If the said reader—he or she—chooses to skip it, and take the chance as to understanding the story, such can be done.

To begin, as in duty bound, with the ladies.

Lady Jane Vavasour is the daughter of the late Earl of Mount Athol. The present earl, the fruit of a second marriage, is at this time a child.

On the death of her father, the earl, Lady Jane was left to the guardianship of her uncle, Colonel Vavasour. By her mother's settlement, she inherited eight hundred pounds a year, and the earl, her father, left her, by will, the sum of twenty-five thousand pounds, and a small estate and house, pleasantly situated on the banks of the silvery Isis, near Oxford.

Here, during part of the year, the winter months, she resided with her uncle, Colonel Vavasour.

During the summer, or at least for a part of it, she lived in her guardian's house, in Grosvenor Square.

It may easily be believed, that, young, beautiful, and an heiress, Lady Jane Vavasour had many suitors.

At the time of which we speak, she wanted ten months of her majority—her twentieth birthday having just passed.

Lady Jane, as might have been expected, was accomplished as well as beautiful. Moreover, she had high spirits, a pleasant disposition, but a hot temper withal.

She had great dash and energy—that which may be best described by the French word, *verve*—and was passionately fond of riding after the hounds.

And indeed it would be difficult to imagine a situation or costume calculated to display the beauties of face and form of the young actress, than as when she sat her horse, with easy grace, by the side of Bamford Copse.

She had, as we have said, many admirers and hangers-on, amongst whom we may mention Captain Maitland.

This gentleman held a commission in the 4th Dragoons, which regiment Colonel Vavasour, now retired, formerly commanded.

He had a fair income, was a man of fashion, and considered, especially by himself, as eminently handsome.

His establishment consisted of chambers in London, and a hunting and shooting-box in the country, which, however, could, if necessary, easily be converted into a family mansion.

Among certain people—especially weak, vain women—he was very popular; and it was considered quite an honour, by many a fashionable lady, to have Captain Maitland dangling in her train.

Now this fashionable warrior had honoured Lady Jane Vavasour with his favourable regards.

He saw she was beautiful, and admired her elegance and style.

But he was by no means insensible to her more solid possessions; and reckoning her income at over two thousand a year, as he might fairly do, irrespective of the charming residence and estate on the banks of the Thames, he decided that she would be a most eligible match.

Accordingly, Augustus Maitland, captain in the 4th Dragoons, determined he would marry Lady Jane.

He went about the matter in the most straightforward and methodical manner. First, he went to her uncle, the colonel, and asked his permission to address his niece.

Colonel Vavasour had no objection to Captain Maitland, personally—indeed, from old association, having been in the same regiment together, he rather liked him.

There was nothing more against the captain's character than that he was a man about town, and no one who has remained a bachelor till approaching forty, is supposed by his fellow men to be altogether immaculate.

Then as to position—Captain Maitland was in good society, and held a commission in a crack regiment.

He was not rich, but he had a fair income, and, all things considered, Colonel Vavasour resolved to throw no obstacle in the way of the captain's suit, but leave it to his niece to decide.

Accordingly Augustus Maitland sought out Lady Jane, and without bothering with any romantic protestation of love sought sanction to his suit.

Lady Jane felt inclined to be offended at this abrupt style of courtship, and laughed at him at first.

But he was not a whit disconcerted thereby, taking it quite coolly, and as a matter of business.

"Very well, then, Lady Jane," he said coolly, "I shall consider I have your permission to address you—to endeavour to win your esteem and love."

"You may endeavour to do whatever you please, Captain Maitland," she replied, "but I tell you frankly that I have never thought of you in any other light than as an acquaintance, and do not suppose I ever shall."

But Captain Maitland was quite contented with this exceedingly cool reception of his suit, and forthwith told Colonel Vavasour that he had his niece's permission to address her.

Thereupon the colonel congratulated his niece, and expressed his opinion that she might, as the saying is, "go farther and fare worse."

Lady Jane, taken by surprise, did not make any denial, and thus, a good deal to her annoyance, she found Captain Maitland installed as her acknowledged suitor.

She let him understand, however, quite clearly, that he was by no means an accepted suitor, but had only permission to try and win her.

This did not disconcert him a bit. He proposed to accept this situation, but she soon discovered, to her still greater annoyance, that somehow or other people did not regard the affair in the same light, and Captain

Maitland always endeavoured, and frequently with complete success, to keep the field to himself, warning off all rivals by letting it be understood he was her accepted lover.

This was very annoying to Jane Vavasour, but somehow she had got into the toils and did not know how to change the face of affairs.

She could not suddenly quarrel with the captain without cause—nor could she be rude to him, for she was well bred, too much of a gentlewoman to resort to this latter course, which many less delicate would have done.

So she confined herself to exercising her sharp wit upon him—letting her woman's tongue loose upon him as far as she could without an absolute breach of good manners.

She often galled the captain deeply by her caustic raillery, and had the satisfaction of seeing him wince under her sarcasms.

But, possibly, having an idea of her object, he carefully avoided anything approaching a quarrel—though more than once when fairly exasperated he let his ill-temper appear, and did his best to retort on her.

Generally, however, she got the best of it.

And yet, somehow, she felt that she was getting further and further into the toils, that imperceptibly and with great skill the captain was weaving an almost invisible net around her.

He received her sarcasms and sharp speeches sometimes in a manner as if to say—"you have a right to say what you like to me, at present I am only your accepted lover—your slave. Even strangers and servants 'take notice,' as the saying is, and often by words, smiles, or even winks, Lady Jane would be reminded of the unpleasant situation into which she had permitted herself to be drawn.

One thing, however, she resolutely determined on, and often with a stamp of her little foot would cry out to herself.

"I will never marry that man, I declare I won't—I hate him."

Girls have been known to make the same resolution before, and yet after all marry the very man.

This, then, is the state of affairs on the November morning at Bamford Copse between two of the characters there introduced to the reader.

We have now to speak of another young lady—Florence Grey—certainly as lovely as Lady Jane Vavasour, but of quite a different type of beauty..

Lady Jane is a brilliant blonde—Florence no less brilliant, in her own style.

She cannot be said to be a brunette—for her hair is not black, but dark brown. Her eyes are of a deep blue, and her complexion, though not fair like that of her friend, is by no means dark enough for her to be described as a brunette.

And yet she possessed many of the characteristics of that peculiar style of beauty.

Her eyes are of so dark a blue as to seem almost black, and her hair, too, seems darker than it really is.

She is not so tall nor so slender as Lady Jane, and yet no fault can be found with her figure.

Her shoulders are broader, her form more developed, and yet, proportionately, her waist is as small and elegant as that of Lady Jane.

Her face and throat are a trifle fuller, and her mouth, and the expression of her features, seem to tell of a quiet, retiring nature, with a somewhat indolent temperament.

Her fine eyes have a dreamy look, except when excited, and then they flash forth like lightning.

It was not only when angry that these languid, liquid orbs shot forth bright glances, for their gleam, when under the influence of pleasurable excitement, was no less brilliant.

Her forehead is not lofty, but broad, and the soft silky hair encroaches far on the temples.

But this is an additional beauty, and adds another charm to an almost faultless head and face.

A high, towering forehead is to the judge of beauty—to the artist, an abomination.

If any one doubts this, let him look at ancient paintings or sculpture—the Venus, as the type of

artistic beauty is both in marble and on canvas invariably low browed.

Though so much more quiet and reserved than her light-hearted, high-spirited friend Lady Jane Vavasour, any one with the least penetration could discern in the calm serene exterior, in the reserved and somewhat indifferent manner when at rest, a mine of hidden power, of strong feelings and passions beneath the serene exterior.

Of the two young ladies as to whose rival claims to beauty opinions might differ, it would perhaps be fair to say that while the fair, and fascinating, and brilliant Lady Jane might more quickly attract the attention of the greater number of admirers, yet that Florence Grey would be more likely to arouse a deep love, a fervent passion, amounting to blind devotion—a christian even.

A few words more as to the circumstances and position of Florence. She is an orphan, left to the guardianship of her aunt, a middle-aged spinster lady, Miss Sarah Shuttleworth.

Florence has for a certainty an income of nine hundred pounds a year, invested in the funds, and she has the chance of two large estates worth as many thousands annually; moreover, it is well understood that she is to be her aunt's heiress, the old lady being rich and careful withal, saving what she could for the sake of her well-beloved niece.

And now we must speak of the estates Florence has a chance of calling her own.

CHAPTER III.

AN AMICABLE LAW SUIT.

It is not often one has a law-suit and is at the same time on the best of terms with the opponent, especially if that opponent is a near relation. For usually litigation between relatives is of the most bitter character.

But this was the case with Florence Grey.

She had a suit pending against her cousin, Captain John Fulford, late of the 50th regiment, commonly

known by herself, and every other friend as Jack Fulford.

Now, Jack Fulford had decidedly the best of it, for he was in possession.

But, strange to say, he did not wish to have the best of it, for he liberally and gallantly offered to give up the Chancery suit and the estates also to his cousin Florence, as he had a sufficient income to live on, he said, without labouring under the charge of depriving an orphan girl of what was her inheritance.

This proposition, however, by no means suited the lawyers. As may well be believed that where estates worth nine thousand a year had to be fought for in Chancery, there would be good pickings for the gentlemen of the long robe—the black robe—the devil's own—indeed.

Nor did it suit Florence Grey. She at once rejected the offer—not indignantly—for when she wrote to him, refusing his offer, it was with tears in her eyes.

“Jack, you are a noble fellow—in spite of all your faults, wild, reckless, thoughtless, a gentleman, in heart and soul, as well as by birth and breeding, and I am proud of you, proud to call you cousin. But I must emphatically, now, at once, and for ever reject your offer, I will not take from you what is most likely yours. I will not win the suit if I can help it. I will not win unless those odious lawyers and my aunt make me in spite of myself. So understand, my refusal is decisive, irrevocable. Good bye, God bless you—your affectionate cousin.
FLORENCE.”

Thus ran the brief letter in which Florence Grey refused her cousin's offer.

To which Jack Fulford wrote back as follows:—

“MY DEAR FLORENCE,—

“You are a foolish little angel, I am afraid our parson would pronounce it not orthodox, though to call an angel foolish (though I am sure that one he has got on the stained glass window in the chancel, is about as foolish a looking animal as ever I saw, all wings and

red drapery). Well now, if you won't take the dirty acres and settle this suit, which is only putting money into the lawyers' pockets, I tell you what I propose. Let's go halves, you take one half, anything you please, and I'll keep the remainder. Now be sensible and write back—yes—your affectionate cousin—JACK FULFORD."

To which Florence replied,—

"MY DEAR JACK,—

"Again I must refuse you. I will own that I thought much more of this last proposal than the other, but I have considered on the matter and also taken counsel with others. I do not wish for more than I have—I do not want the estates—I hate the thought of being a wealthy heiress, with half a dozen selfish men following me, persecuting and swearing eternal love all for the sake of the estates, until at last, in very desperation, I accepted one, perhaps the worst of the lot. I am sure you would not like to see that Jack—your affectionate cousin.

FLORENCE."

This last was a skilful stroke, a woman's thrust keen and clever, for Florence had an impression that Jack Fulford had a sneaking regard for her own fair self over and above the ordinary fraternal love which all cousins are supposed to bear one towards the other.

And it told on Jack. He threw the letter down on the table after reading the last paragraph.

"Confound the little jade. If I thought so I'd fight her tooth and nail. But she only said so to induce me to give up the idea of relinquishing the suit or even of half the property. But yet there's a deal of truth in what she says. Yes, I should hate to see her picked up by some money-hunting vagabond with nothing to recommend him except a flashy exterior—big eyes, curly hair, and lots of lies and soft speeches. Not that it's anything to me, of course she has a right to marry any one she chooses, and at all events I shall never marry. Besides, if I wanted to she wouldn't have me. She took good care to let me know that neither was there nor ever could be, anything but cousinly affection between us.

This was a fact; Florence Grey had deliberately let

her cousin understand that they could never be anything but cousins.

This occurred one Christmas time, when Jack had danced with his fair relation a good many times, and had got so far in soft speeches, very nearly love speeches if not quite, as to approach, and actually pass, the bounds of cousinly privilege.

He persuaded himself he had never meant anything, and she also had done the same. But still he felt a little sore on the point, and in his own heart would have been glad if she had not so explicitly let him know her mind on the subject.

She might have waited till she was asked, he growled, and this was his great consolation.

As for herself she felt glad, and yet sorry she had given her cousin Jack so distinct an intimation.

"I don't think he meant anything. It was unmaidenly on my part. And yet if he did, it will have saved a deal of trouble. For, of course, I can never think of Jack as anything but a cousin, at most a brother. And then he is so wild and reckless. And besides, people would say that I married him to patch up the law-suit and to keep the family property together. No, it is much the best as it is ; though they do say that marriage generally reforms a wild, reckless man, if his heart is in the right place ; and I am sure Jack is as honourable and kind-hearted a fellow as ever breathed."

And to wind up this soliloquy, Florence said to herself—

"I do hope that when he does marry, he will choose a wife worthy of him—not throw himself away on some artful jade who cares for nothing but his money.

Thus these two cousins each closed their soliloquy in nearly the same manner.

All things considered, it would have been strange indeed had they not been excellent friends, though principals in a Chancery suit one against the other.

For one offered to relinquish the prize, to gain which they were nominally opponents.

To tell the truth, it was all the doings of the lawyers and Florence's aunt, Miss Mary Shuttleworth.

The men of law, of course, instinctively hated the thought of a suit, so promising for bills of costs, being amicably settled out of court, and did all they could to force matters on to such a pitch as to render such a settlement impossible.

They could not, however, disturb, or in any way alter the good feeling subsisting between the two cousins.

Their respective solicitors declared that they were the most provoking of clients, enough to drive a lawyer mad.

Neither cared a bit about the suit—the one in possession offered to give up the property, while the claimant had actually been insane enough to write a letter to the opposite party, offering to forego her claim.

But Florence's aunt had other reasons for wishing her niece to prosecute the suit, and win, if possible.

She was almost as fond of her harum-scarum nephew, Jack Fulford, as of her lovely niece, and her greatest ambition was to see them man and wife.

Now, she had enough of woman's keen, intuitive perception, to be aware that there was some cause of repulsion existing between the young people, although, at the same time, there was another power of attraction at work, but not strong enough.

She had also sense, knowledge of human nature enough, rather, not to urge the advantages of such a marriage on her niece, who, despite her quiet manner, she well knew, was as proud a girl as ever stepped, and would at once resent any suggestion of the kind.

She thought that the fault lay on Jack Fulford's side.

Well, perhaps it did, perhaps it did not; anyhow, she had decided that the young man—the fortunate possessor of large estate and fortune, naturally wild and reckless, had determined to lead a bachelor life, and enjoy himself with his bachelor friends, to the top of his bent.

Now this was all very well, so long as he was in the enjoyment of an income of some nine or ten thousand a year.

It would be waste of time and breath for her to speak

to him and point out to him the desirability of a marriage with his cousin.

He would laugh in his good-humoured way, tell her that Florence was well off and did not want him, and that he, for his part, was quite satisfied, and was not a marrying man.

But if he should lose the Chancery suit, he would not only be deprived of his large income, but have to pay heavy costs ; and thus, from thousands a year, he would be reduced to a few hundreds.

Of course Florence would insist on returning him a great part of the property—and offering him the whole—but she felt certain that she could so work on his pride, that he would not accept the gift.

Then, she argued, she might point out to him how the affair might be made pleasant for all parties ; and, straining a point, she might hint that Florence really loved him, and that, if he would not take back his own, she would herself refuse to benefit by it, but sell the whole of the estates, and give away the proceeds.

Thus a fine property would pass away from the family for ever.

This would stagger him, she thought, and he would, at all events, promise to think about it.

And then, thus armed, she would go to Florence, and tell her that the only way in which Jack Fulford would take back the property she had won from him, was with herself to boot, as his wife.

A very pretty little scheme, cleverly planned by a clever woman, with the best possible of motives and good wishes for both of the young people.

We shall see in due course what came of it.

CHAPTER IV

LORD SCATTERBRAIN.

BUT what of Lord Scatterbrain, the reader may ask?

We are coming to him, *via* Jack Fulford.

Jack, of course, ignorant of his worthy aunt's astute plot to see him married and settled, remained on the most friendly terms both with her and his beautiful cousin.

It has been already mentioned that, he had, besides his English estate, a little property in Ireland.

This latter was called Castle Carrick, although there was no castle, nor to all appearance had there ever been.

However, it was a very nice little property, most of the rental being derived from houses, in country towns close by.

Besides the house and grounds, there were about four hundred acres of good land.

And when it is added that there was excellent shooting, fishing, and hunting, it is not strange that Jack Fulford should spend a portion of the year on his Irish property.

He had come into wealth suddenly, unexpectedly, by the deaths of a distant relation, a fourth or fifth cousin, and both his sons in one week.

The lawyer, after research, decided that Captain John Fulford was the heir at law, and forthwith he took out letters of administration, and also unopposed possession of both estates.

At the time he was captain in a line regiment, with only one hundred and fifty pounds a year, besides his pay, to live on.

He at once resigned his commission, being wisely of opinion that the profession of a soldier in time of peace was neither glorious nor agreeable.

But shortly after he had taken possession of the property, an acute lawyer made another discovery, which threw some doubt on his right to the estates.

And another claimant, in Florence Grey, his second cousin, by his mother's side, was discovered.

So far as near relationship to the late owner of the property was concerned, her claim was certainly better than his.

But then she was a woman, and by the law of England, freehold land, except under certain special circumstances, always goes down in the male kind.

But in this case, the men of law decided, that there were special circumstances, and that by reason of certain provisions in the title-deeds of the land and other documents relating thereto, Florence Grey was the rightful heir, or rather, heiress.

And so there arose, against the wish of the young lady herself, a very pretty lawsuit.

It had at this time been going on for a year and a half, and seemed likely to last at least as long again.

Just at the time the discovery of Florence Grey's claims was made, Jack Fulford was stopping at Castle Carrick, with one friend, Mr. Thomas Loftus.

It was the end of the hunting season, just the time when foxes are strongest, and show the best sport.

Fulford, a keen sportsman, never missed a meet within twenty miles, and once, after a splendid run, he found himself, at the end of the day, with a lame horse, and forty miles from home.

He was in a strange part of the country, miles from the nearest town.

To get home that night was an impossibility, and our friend was at a loss what to do.

Now the run had been a long one, and so severe in point of pace, that, out of a field of seventy who went away with the hounds, there were only four at the death of the fox.

These were, Jack Fulford, the huntsman, the second whip, and a stranger, excellently mounted, who introduced himself to our friend, as Lord Scatterbrain, of Ballysmashem Castle.

"Faith, that's a splendid bit o' blood o' yourn, sir, she wint like a bird—it's a pity she's gone lame."

"I don't think it's anything serious," replied Jack,

much surprised at the speech and manner of this young fellow, who said he was a lord.

And the more he talked the greater was Fulford's astonishment, till at last he began to think that the fellow was hoaxing him.

It was not so much the broadness of the brogue which staggered him, for many Irish gentlemen spoke with quite as strong an Hibernian accent, but the language—the words—the grammar in fact—of the *soi-disant* peer.

They had to ride together for some two miles, all four of them, along a country lane, in order to gain the main road. And Jack contrived to drop behind and make a few enquiries of the huntsman, concerning the gentleman on the black horse.

"Shure and it's Lord Scatterbrain—more power to him. Maybe, you've never heard the history of his lordship?"

"No, indeed, I have not," replied Jack.

"Ah! then I'll just tell yez in a jiffey. His lordship niver knew he was a lord till less nor a year back."

"The devil he didn't," cried Fulford, astonished.

"It's throe for you, squire, and no mistake. I heard his father, the Viscount Scatterbrain, that's dead and gone, was married on the sly to a purty girl, only a cotter's daughter, when he was a young man. But the girl didn't know the right name of the man that married her—niver dramed it was the rich Earl of Bally-smashem Castle. And so she wint away thinking that her husband had deserted her. And in due coorse a son was born to her, his lordship there, and she and he lived together till he was a great strapping lad of twinty, always in poverty and trouble. And then the divil sint a message to the old lord that he wanted him, that his time was up. Well, the ould villain, the like as many more, repinted on his death bed, and he set his lawyer's agents to work, to scour the country all around, to find the woman he had deceived and deserted, and his son, his lawful heir. Well, your honour, they found him, and the day before he died, the lawyer proved the marriage was a good marriage, and the ould lord owned the lad as his son. And so, av coorse, he became Viscount Scatterbrain, an' good luck go wi'd him, say I, for a

better master, or sportsman, never broke bread or sat a horse. Just look at the hounds and horses, your honour, sure the hunt was niver as well done as since Lord Scatterbrain has took it in hand."

"Oh! He's the master of the hunt, is he? I have never hunted with this pack before, and yet it's strange I have not heard his name."

"He isn't the master in name, though in fact and truth he is. You see, sir, he was too modest, being as he said, though a lord, only an ignorant omadhaun, to put himself forward as the master of the hounds, though there was one wanted bad, since the wild squire broke his neck. He thought, and maybe he was right, that the gintry would be offended, and wouldn't hunt under a master of hounds who was learning to read."

"Learnin' to read. You don't mean to say he cau't read?" cried Fulford, in astonishment.

"Faith, and I didn't say nothing av the sort, for his lordship's a rale fine scholar now, though six months ago the tutor from Eugland was hard at work at him wid a, b, c, and such like."

Jack smiled at the idea of a man, who could not read six months previously, being a fine scholar now; but allowed the huntsman to proceed, feeling quite interested in his narrative.

"And so his lordship got a young gintleman, in the neighbourhood, Squire Daly, to take the name of master of the hunt, while he himsilf found the main o' the money. And just well has he done it; for sure, the 'Tearaways,' as this pack o' beauties is called, niver showed such fine sport before."

Jack Fulford was quite interested in the huntsman's narrative, and presently going up alongside Lord Scatterbrain, entered into conversation with him.

Although the huntsman declared he was a fine scholar, the mistakes he made were really ludicrous, and several times Fulford could scarcely help laughin'.

But despite his terrible brogue, and the way in which he murdered the queen's English, Jack discovered that he was really a shrewd, keen, clever fellow, good tempered, and quick to learn.

Once catching a smile on Jack's face, at some unusually glaring blunder in speech, he said, quite good naturedly, "Ah! now you're laughing at me, as well you may, sir. Now just tell me the mistake I made, and how I ought to say it, and I'll be obliged to you?"

Jack felt ashamed of himself for laughing at his companion's ignorance, and could not help admiring his good nature, and willingness—anxiousness to learn.

He pointed out to Lord Scatterbrain the mistake he had made, and corrected his error.

"By Jove," he said to himself, "this peasant lord will very soon lick himself into decent shape. It's a rough diamond, but one capable of taking high polish, or I'm greatly mistaken."

Presently Lord Scatterbrain remarked the lameness of Fulford's horse.

"That little mare of yours, sir, is as lame as a three-legged dog. Have you far to go?"

"Yes, a good step. I live at Castle Carrick.

"Castle Carrick. Oh! you're Mr. Fulford, then. Why it's nigh forty miles as the crow flies. You'll never get there to night."

"I'm afraid not; but how do you happen to know my name?"

"Shure, sir, I make it a study; when I've done my lessons wid the tutor in the morning, I just get the big map, and thin Squire Daly and me go over all the country round, and I larn the names of the gentry. For you see they tell me that a man in my position ought to know all about the people round. Oh, I'm getting on fine, I tell you, sir."

Jack could not help smiling at, and yet liking this bumpkin lord, for the utter absence of pride or false shame with which he spoke of his own shortcomings.

"Well, now, look here, Mister Fulford," pursued Scatterbrain, "it won't do for you, a stranger in these parts, to go ridin' about on a lame horse. It's only about seven miles to my place, Ballysmashem. Be Jabers, you'll just come there wid me, and I'll see that horse and man are well cared for."

Jack, who was rather amused at, and interested in his

new acquaintance, agreed, and they rode on together to the castle, where, as the peer had promised, horse and man were well cared for, the most bounteous hospitality being the rule at Ballysmasheen Castle.

And so it happened that this casual acquaintance, struck up in the hunting-field, grew into an intimacy, and at last ripened into something like a very strong friendship.

Jack Fulford liked Scatterbrain, and Scatterbrain liked him, so it came about that the former offered to take the peer in hand and put a polish on him.

Lord Scatterbrain was delighted, and Jack, at the close of the hunting season, took him on a tour on the Continent, stopping a week or two in London.

Abroad, Scatterbrain's brogue and mistakes in English passed unnoticed, and the young lord rapidly acquired, not only knowledge of the world and usages of society, but what was of quite as much if not more consequence, confidence. At the time at which he is introduced to the reader, he has been for more than a year and a half the intimate friend and companion of Jack Fulford, and the latter has been heard to declare that another twelve months will transform the rough diamond into a polished gem.

CHAPTER V.

FLORENCE GREY BLOWS HER SILVER BUGLE.

BEFORE we go back again to Bamford Copse, we must say just a few words more about Captain Fulford and Florence Grey.

Jack and Lord Scatterbrain have not long returned from abroad.

The former has invited his aunt and cousin Florence, to visit him at his pleasant country seat, on the banks of the Thames.

The old lady, only too glad to bring them together, guarantees to Florence that, fortified by her presence,

there would not be the least impropriety in her accepting the invitation of her cousin.

And so when Jack and Scatterbrain came down from London to spend the first part of the hunting season at Woodford Grange, as Fulford's country seat was named, Florence and her aunt were already installed there, and had got the place into fit condition to receive its master and guests.

Their horses, grooms, and valet, had been sent down some days previously. When Fulford and his friend arrived it was somewhat late at night, and the ladies had retired, which was a great relief to Scatterbrain.

For, hitherto, he had not attempted that most difficult and dangerous ordeal, the test of ladies' society.

On the Continent he did excellently well, but there manners are more free and easy, and the French especially are so accustomed to eccentricities of Englishmen, that he got on as well as others.

But here, in England, it was different. He knew there was a stern code of etiquette, and custom, to break which, must cover him with ridicule.

Nevertheless, he yielded to Fulford's persuasion, and agreed to face it.

"You see, I'll begin gently with you. I will invite my cousin and aunt, and both of them will be just the same as members of the family. Then besides, they'll know all about you, and Florence is too good natured a girl to laugh at you, or cause you any annoyance whatever."

So down they came, and after a weed in the smoking room, and sundry hot whiskies, went to bed.

Lord Scatterbrain got on tolerably well at breakfast next morning, both gentlemen being in hunting costume, scarlet coat and top boots, by the tip-top London makers——of——street, for the "pink and cords," and ——of——street, for the boots.

Florence, too, appeared at the table in her riding habit, for she was going with them to the meet, and altogether things went very pleasantly, his lordship only committing one or two solecisms, which the young lady passed over with a pleasant smile.

Thus, on handing her an egg, he cracked it for her,

and when she asked him to pass her the dry toast, he volunteered to butter it for her.

And so from the pleasant country-house breakfast table, we will take flight, on the wings of fancy, and alight once more by the side of Bamford Copse.

Lord Scatterbrain soon recovered from his confusion at the absurd mistake he had made, in supposing a lady would drink brandy and water from a flask, and Lady Jane, herself, was quite charmed at the good-tempered naive way in which he apologised.

"You must excuse me, Lady Jane, really, I didn't know any better. You must understand, that though a nobleman, I have not been brought up and educated as one, and what little of good manners I have got hold of, I owe altogether to Captain Fulford, whom I am proud to call my friend."

"Oh! don't mention it, Lord Scatterbrain," she said, smiling. "It is I who am to blame, I ought not to have laughed so rudely, pray forgive me."

At this moment a sound was heard, dear to the heart of all fox hunters, first, a whimpering sort of yelp in the cover, followed almost immediately by the deep baying of several hounds.

"That's old Witchcraft," cried Colonel Vavasour. "I'd swear to her note among a thousand, and she's true as steel. It's a sure find."

And then in the course of a minute, other hounds gave tongue, and then all the pack, making up altogether a chorus of heavenly music, as I have heard a fox-hunter call it.

"Jane, my dear, your horse seems very restive, and I see you can hardly hold him," the colonel said, addressing his niece.

"Oh! it is all right, uncle," the high-spirited girl replied, "do not be afraid for me. He is only a little bit excited at the first sound of hounds and horn."

"Don't get too far a-head, there's a good girl; let me keep close to you."

"Oh! I'm afraid, uncle, there is little chance of my getting too far a-head. I expect I shall be thrown out as I was last Thursday."

"The Lady Jane rides like an angel," said Jack Fulford to Lord Scatterbrain. "My cousin Florence here, has not a chance with her."

"I wish she had an angel's wings," remarked the colonel, "so that the next time the horse blunders down at a fence she may fly away out of the saddle, and not get such a terrible fall as she did then."

"If I had an angel's wings, uncle," she replied, laughing, "perhaps I should fly away altogether."

At this moment a loud "view-halloa," was heard from the other side of the wood, and all was motion and excitement.

The hunters waited a short time, for it happens only too often that the fox is headed back by some excited horseman with more zeal than prudence yelling out at the top of his voice "tally ho! tally ho!" the moment reynard slinks out of cover.

But in a minute or so there came the welcome shout of "gone away, gone away!" and the sound of the huntsmen's horn calling the hounds from the cover, from which the fox had broken and gone away in reality.

Then there was a clattering rush of hoofs, and some two score of horsemen and horsewomen swept round the north end of the cover, and beheld a right welcome sight.

The whole pack, well together, with noses in the air, going at top speed over the second meadow from the cover.

The scent was hot, and they were close behind the quarry.

If it should prove a strong dog fox they were certain of a rattling run.

And now Lord Scatterbrain showed out to advantage.

He was mounted on a three-quarter-bred nag, a capital fencer, and with first-rate speed.

In less than ten minutes, so good was the pace that the field began to tail off.

Jack Fulford and Scatterbrain kept side by side, and a-head of them, going like blazes, as Jack said, was Lady Jane Vavasour, her uncle the colonel, who was a heavy weight already using his spurs, in order to keep near his rash niece.

But it was a vain effort, and in less than twenty minutes he fell back level with Jack and Scatterbrain.

"Captain Fulford, I can't keep up in the first flight," he said. "This pace, and my weight together, tell a tale. Keep my niece in sight if you can. I'm afraid she'll come to grief riding in that break-neck fashion."

"All right, colonel. I'll keep close to her. We'll draw up after the next fence."

Whereupon the colonel fell back into the ruck, and with many others saw no more of the hounds that day.

The pace was a rattler.

Ahead of our two friends were only Lady Jane Vavasour, the huntsman, second whip, master of the hounds, and one other gentleman in black coat and Napoleon boots.

"That fellow rides well," remarked Scatterbrain to Fulford, "who is he?"

"Don't know. Come, let's get a-head a bit—this pace won't last."

And a-head they went, and soon drew up to the flanks of Lady Jane's horse.

Hitherto they had been going a-head—but steadily and had not punished their horses.

Close behind them was Captain Maitland, who, mounted on a three-hundred-guinea horse, was doing his utmost to come up with the first flight, so as to be near Lady Jane.

He well knew that it was her delight and great ambition to ride away from him, and spared no money in horse flesh.

But, like Colonel Vavasour, he was something of a heavy weight, riding over fourteen stone, while Lady Jane was in comparison a feather weight.

And, moreover, the gallant captain had a horror of going fast, at a brook, or fence, and declared it was unsportsmanlike to "rush a fence."

Lady Jane then was very unsportsmanlike, for she went at her fences at full gallop, and even Scatterbrain, himself a reckless rider, was astonished at her temerity.

"Be Jabers," he said to Fulford, the brogue and Irish way of speaking always breaking out when he was excited, "the girls in ould Ireland can ride a bit—but this Lady Jane bates them all hollow."

Now Scatterbrain and his mentor went at their fences at a fair pace, and by dint of careful riding, and the fact of having husbanded the endurance of their horses, were able to draw close up to Lady Jane.

Captain Maitland, on the other hand, although he went fast enough across the open, rode so slowly at his fences and ditches, which unfortunately for him were very frequent about here, that he at last lost ground, gradually, and by the time our friends were abreast of Lady Jane, had fallen back two fields, and was passed by Miss Florence Grey.

"Come along, Captain," cried that young lady who, an excellent horsewoman, had been riding much more carefully than her dashing friend, Lady Jane. "I am going to join my cousin and Lord Scatterbrain. I see they are in the first flight, and there is Lady Jane too, going like a bird, I declare you are not half a cavalier."

With that the young lady gave her horse rein, and passing Captain Maitland, on his three-hundred-guinea bay, rode at the next fence, a bank topped by a hedge, over which she quickly disappeared, leaving the captain to follow at his leisure.

Scatterbrain and Jack Fulford were now abreast of Lady Jane, but that young lady, evidently not wishing to be out-paced, pricked her horse with her spur, and with a merry laugh shot ahead again.

"Steady, steady," said Jack Fulford, "the more we try to get alongside of her, the harder she'll go. We'll keep just a few yards behind her, till this burst is over."

A burst, indeed, it was. Already five-and-twenty minutes, at a tremendous pace, without a check, and of a field of sixty-three men, only eight or ten within sight of the hounds.

At this moment a peculiar sound was heard. A small clear clarion-like trumpet note.

"By jove!" cried Jack Fulford, "my cousin Flo' has come to grief. That's her horn. I must go back and see what's the matter. Scatterbrain, you ride on and keep close to Lady Jane. I hand over to you the colonel's trust, and appoint you in my place."

Lord Scatterbrain accepted the offer, and urging his

horse, was quickly once again close at the flanks of that fair horsewoman, whose reckless riding caused her uncle so much uneasiness. And not a little proud was he of his appointment as squire in waiting to such a charming damsel.

CHAPTER VI.

A CHECK AND A RUNAWAY HORSE.

THE sound which had attracted the attention of Fulford was indeed the note of a horn.

Florence Grey, for fun and fancy, just a quaint whim of hers, carried a little silver hunting horn, on which she had learned to blow in most sportsman-like style.

She had told her cousin, laughingly, that if ever he heard this horn, he would know that she was in trouble, and must hasten to her assistance.

This he promised to do, of course, and soon found himself called upon to redeem his word.

After riding back for a hundred yards, he came in sight of the fair trumpeter dismounted, on foot, while her horse was quietly trotting about the field.

"Are you hurt, Flo?" he asked, riding up to her.

"Not a bit—never mind me—catch my horse," she cried.

And then he set off at a gallop, and after a little trouble, and a smart chase, caught the truant steed, which he as quickly as possible brought back to its fair rider.

"How did you manage it," he asked, as dismounting he gave her his hand for her to spring into the saddle.

"Oh! the stupid animal shied at something just as he should have risen at the fence. Where are Lady Jane and the rest of them?"

"A mile or so ahead by this time," was the reply. "I reckon that unless there is a check, we shall see no more of the hunt to-day."

"Oh! what a nuisance," she cried, "and I had deter-

mined to be as well at the finish as Jane, although she did go such a tremendous pace at the beginning."

"Too fast to last," said Fulford.

"But I had forgotten—I am depriving her of her cavalier," said Florence, with perhaps a little tinge of annoyance in her voice. "I heard Colonel Vavasour ask you to keep close to her if he was pounded, and you promised you would. You had better ride on at once as hard as ever you can. I am all right now, I assure you."

"Oh! it's of no use," replied Jack Fulford. "I don't mean to break my horse's wind, and as to pulling up with them now, unless they come to a check directly, it's impossible."

"But you ought to be ashamed of yourself for leaving the lady after promising," urged Florence. "Why did you ride back?"

"Well, that's cool," replied Jack, laughing, "why did you blow your silver bugle? Did you not say that if ever I heard it in the field it was to be a signal that you had come to grief? Of course I was bound to come back."

"Ah! and there is Lady Jane, reckless rider as she is, all alone. It's too bad of you."

Thus Florence chided her cousin as they rode on together side by side, at a hard gallop.

"Oh, no—not all alone—I left her a very excellent esquire."

"Who?"

"Lord Scatterbrain."

Florence laughed.

"What that Irishman of yours, with the extraordinary history, the wild man of the woods, as I call him; that man who wished her to drink brandy out of his flask at the cover side? Oh! that is a capital joke. Lady Jane won't be obliged to you, I'll warrant."

"I tell you what it is, Florence, I won't have you talking against Scatterbrain. He is a capital fellow, and I am quite certain Lady Jane could not be in better hands."

"If she is of your opinion, well and good; it is nothing to me," replied Florence, who was in a perverse mood,

not having got over her annoyance at seeing Jack established as esquire to Lady Jane.

Indeed, it was not altogether certain that she was very sorry for the mishap which caused her to blow her horn and summon him to her aid.

But we must now go a-head, and see how it fares with Lord Scatterbrain and Lady Jane and the first flight.

That high-spirited young lady presently looked back, and beheld Lord Scatterbrain alone close beside her.

"I wonder what has become of Captain Fulford," she said to herself, "he must have come to grief, I'm afraid, for I heard him promise uncle he would keep close to me all day."

Then she urged on her horse, and endeavoured, as a matter of pride, to shake off the Irish peer who kept so provokingly close behind her.

She succeeded for the moment, and gained half a field on him. But after the next fence he regained his lost ground, and was soon almost alongside her.

The pace now began to tell upon her horse.

She was light, and as a rule a good horsewoman, but certainly on this day she had not ridden judiciously, and by going at such a furious speed at the first had taken too much out of the animal before he had fairly got his wind.

Scatterbrain on the other hand, though he had ridden hard, had exercised good judgment, and his horse had a good deal left in him yet.

So he was able with ease to keep his relative position with regard to Lady Jane, greatly to his own satisfaction.

Fortunately for some of the few in the second division, those immediately behind the first flight, there came a check, and the panting, steaming steeds had opportunity to draw their breath.

The check occurred at the edge of one of those sunken embankments with high, steep sides, common in the country parts of England.

A cast was made, the hounds being taken in a semi-circle, and striking the road again some two hundred yards further down.

Such of the horsemen as were fortunate enough to be

present after such a burst—thirty-two minutes at a tremendous pace, over a stiff fence and timber country—walked their horses quietly along the sunken road, by the side of the steep embankment.

Now where the check occurred it was possible for a horse to scramble down from the embankment into the road below, although this would be a somewhat dangerous operation.

Scatterbrain, with the true instincts of a sportsman, walked his horse down by the side of the road, keeping his eye on the hounds, watching the cast they were making, and the results.

Lady Jane Vavasour for choice or fancy remained where the check had taken place.

The first cast proved unsuccessful, and after a second there were no traces to be found of the sly fox.

The hounds and huntsmen were now so far down the road as to be nearly out of sight.

It was just at this time that a rabbit darted by a few yards from where she was, and instantly disappeared in its burrow, just giving a glimpse of its white tail as it vanished.

At the same moment, bang went a gun. The sudden report alone was sufficient to startle a high spirited horse, but in addition to this some of the shot struck the animal. He had recovered his wind, and, rearing and plunging, was instantly unmanageable.

In a bound or two he was close to the bank, and in another second, despite all his rider's efforts, he plunged down.

By what seemed almost a miracle the horse reached the bottom in safety, and Lady Jane kept her seat.

Then, blinded with pain from the shot, and terror, the animal started down the road at a furious gallop.

Lady Jane Vavasour knew that some three quarters of a mile further on, the road bent sharply to the right, at so acute an angle as to render it a matter of absolute impossibility to turn a runaway horse, and at this point, straight ahead, there was a steep grassy slope, so steep that the only possible way in which the farmer could turn it to advantage was by feeding it off with sheep.

No horse could even be walked down this hill which was indeed almost precipitous in its character.

Lady Jane, pale as death, tugged desperately at the reins, for she knew the full extent of her danger, and then the curb broke, and the maddened horse got the bit between his teeth, and one of the bridle strap buckles giving way snatched or wrenched it out of his mouth altogether.

"I'm lost! God help me!" she cried, and then she screamed aloud.

And in good truth she had reason to give way to that wild despairing cry, for her case seemed utterly hopeless

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That shriek was heard by the horsemen further down the road, amongst them by Lord Scatterbrain.

To their horror they beheld a young lady, her hair flying in the wind—going along the road at furious speed on a runaway horse.

"The Lord save and deliver us," exclaimed a young farmer. "She's a dead woman if she can't stop the horse. There's a sharp turn about half a mile further on, and a bank so steep that a cat would have to be careful going down it."

Several of the horsemen rode up to the edge of the sunken road, thinking to get down and stop the horse.

But unfortunately the bank here was almost perpendicular, and it would have been madness to have attempted the descent, something like leaping off a high wall.

Scatterbrain was amongst those most anxious to save the lady, for he felt ever and anon what every man naturally must under such circumstances, a sense of personal responsibility, he having accepted the charge of seeing to the safety of the beautiful, reckless, and now unfortunate young lady.

"Tear and ages," he cried, in a broad Irish brogue, as was always the case when he was excited. "Is there no way down into the road but this here, as stape as the wall of Dublin Castle?"

"Yes, there's a place a quarter of a mile further down," cried the huntsman, "but it's the other side of a most tremendous brook."

"To blazes wid the brook," cried Scatterbrain, "it's meself that's on the other side of it in a jiffy—aye, if it's as wide as Boyne Water."

"I don't believe there's a horse in the hunt that can jump Ashton brook, after such a run as we've had."

"Then it's this little bit o' blood and this Irish nobleman that does it for a thousand," cried Scatterbrain, driving in the spurs, and starting full gallop down by the side of the road, just as Lady Jane's horse came thundering by.

All was now intense interest and excitement.

"God help her, she's lost," cried one, as the runaway horse, bearing the figure with the pale face and despairing eyes, to her death, galloped past, "he's got the bit just out of his mouth, and she's no control whatever over him."

As she came by she cried for help, and threw a piteous despairing glance at the horsemen on the bank above her, a look of such agony and terror, as to go, like a keen knife, to the hearts of all who beheld.

A look which no one of them ever forgot to his dying day.

The horsemen rode on at a gallop by the side of the road, but only a few could keep pace with the runaway.

Scatterbrain, fully a hundred yards ahead of any of them, rode on at full gallop.

And in a minute or so he saw the brook before him.

"Now, my beauty," he cried, to his horse, "over we go; go at it with the heart of a lion, and leap like a deer."

The next moment his good steed came thundering up to the brink.

CHAPTER VII.

LORD SCATTERBRAIN TO THE RESCUE.

It was a moment of breathless suspense to all those who, riding on behind, witnessed, what was thought, the Irish peer's mad attempt.

At all times the brook was most formidable and dan-

gerous, and not one out of twenty would ever attempt it even with a fresh horse.

And after such a burst as this, there was not one who did not think it almost hopeless.

They saw Scatterbrain ride boldly up to this desperate leap. Checking the speed of his horse slightly, holding him well together, they saw his whip hand go up in the air, saw the gallant steed rise to the leap, for there was a little hedge on the near side, and the next moment all was over.

Involuntary cries of admiration broke forth, for the next moment they saw the Irish lord tearing away at full speed on the other side of the brook.

"By jove! he's a plucked one," cried Sir James Ward, the master of the hounds.

"I've heard strange tales about him. That he's an uneducated bumpkin, and so on. But, be that as it may, I'll ask him to dinner, and those who don't choose to meet him may keep away."

Lord Scatterbrain, meanwhile, steered his horse to the brink of the sunken road, and saw Lady Jane still borne on at a furious pace by the runaway, some twenty yards ahead.

There was not a moment to be lost, not a second even, if she was to be saved.

The bank here was steep, but not utterly impracticable, and he resolved to make the attempt.

"Holy saints and angels help me," he cried, and the next moment essayed the perilous descent.

It was an affair of seconds only. Neck or nothing!

A hurried scramble, a plunge or two, and trembling with terror, the horse was safe at the bottom.

For only one moment did he pause. Then urging the animal with whip and spur, dashed on in pursuit of the runaway.

Lady Jane was now fully a hundred yards ahead, and the steep bank which, if her horse could not be checked, must certainly prove her death, not more than a quarter of a mile.

But Scatterbrain had a great advantage over the runaway horse. The furious pace at which the latter had

been going must be telling by this time, whereas Scatterbrain's animal was ridden, and well ridden too.

Still it was a question—a question of life or death, whether he could overtake her in time.

She heard the clattering of hoofs behind her, and turning round her head looked back.

And ah! with such a wild appealing glance. It made his heart bump within his breast, and nerved him afresh for his task.

Her face, though pale as that of a corpse was, he thought, lovely as that of an angel.

“Keep your heart, and hould him in wid all your might, and I’ll be wid you in a moment. For the love of the virgin and your own life hould him in, and I’ll save ye yet.”

She heard the words shouted in a loud clear voice, and, despite the brogue, they were heavenly music in her ears.

She recognised the voice, recognised the figure of the Irish lord, who alone of all the field came to her aid in the moment of her desperate need.

And despite her danger, this thought flashed lightning-like through her mind.

“Where’s Captain Maitland, now?”

Five seconds! ten seconds! nearly a quarter of a minute! nearer and nearer came the sound of the clattering hoofs behind her, and again she hears the encouraging words:

“Kape up your heart. Hould him in a minute!”

Looking ahead she sees, with horror, the terrible bank not fifty yards in front.

Glancing over her shoulder, she sees Scatterbrain at her horse’s flank.

Another second he is right abreast of her, on the near side. Absolutely within reach!

And it is now that, for the first time, he sees that her horse has got free from the control of the bit.

For a moment he was staggered—aghast; but he did not lose his presence of mind or energy.

He had thought to grasp the horse by the bridle, and so either check his career, or turn him at the dangerous point.

But now that was useless, for the bit had no power. A stroke of genius flashed through the mind of Scatterbrain.

"Hould on tight. For the love of Heaven hould on tight," he cried, knowing that a desperate struggling and plunging must accompany his next act.

Bringing his horse up close to hers, and a little ahead, he reached out his right arm, and with a sudden strong grip, seized the runaway by the muzzle, tightly compressing the nostrils, and of course, nearly suffocating the animal.

As he expected, there was a short time of desperate plunging and struggling, and he, himself, was once nearly dragged from the saddle.

They were now at the turn of the road, within ten yards of the dangerous bank.

"Hould on, my lady," he cried, "I've got the divil by the nozzle. Hould on, and by St. Patrick I will!"

And in a moment or two more it was all over. The battle was fought, the victory won. The runaway steed cowed and conquered.

"By jabbers, my lady," said Scatterbrain, "it was hot work while it lasted. I thought the divil would a'got the best of o' me oncet."

He now brought the horses to a standstill. Both were panting and in a froth of foam, and hers was shaking with terror in every nerve, but quite incapable of further mischief.

"Don't be frightened, my lady," he said, noticing that she trembled. "I've took all the spunk out of the divil. I'll warrant he ain't got a trot left in him, let alone a gallop."

Then he noticed that she was swaying in the saddle, and it occurred to him that she was faint.

Dismounting in all haste, he was just in time to catch her in his arms, as she fell from her horse, not absolutely in a swoon but very near to it.

With his assistance she was just able to walk to the side of the road where he seated her on the grass, and left her to recover herself, thinking she would do so quite as well without his aid, while he, himself, proceeded to catch the horses which, for the moment, he had let go, and fastened them up to a gate hard by.

Then he returned to Lady Jane Vavasour, and found her still faint and trembling, not having recovered from the effects of this terrible and nearly fatal adventure.

He pulled out his brandy flask, and unscrewing the top was about offering it to her, when he suddenly remembered what a fool he had made of himself earlier in the morning, and with what scorn and ridicule she had laughed in his face.

"Fool that I am! Shure I'd be afther inshulting the lady again. It's loike my ignorance," he muttered aloud.

She heard the words, and said with a faint voice, and with an attempt to smile—

"I will take a little brandy, if you will be kind enough to give it me."

"Right you are," said Scatterbrain, in great delight, "that's the stuff to set you right, and there aint a headache in a hog'shead."

Taking the flask from him, she put it to her lips and sipped a little; and yet, strange to say, it was scarcely more than an hour previously that she had felt herself insulted, and laughed scornfully in his face.

In a short time she recovered herself, and was able to rise to her feet.

"Lord Scatterbrain," she said, in tremulous accents, "you have saved my life. I do not know how I can ever sufficiently reward you."

"Ah! my lady, don't talk like that," he said, good-humouredly, and now quite at his ease, "shure I did no more than any other gentleman, nobleman or man would—no more than any other gentleman of the hunt would do."

His brogue, which he had in a measure got under, now showed itself in irresistible force.

"Then why did they not? Is it not a fact, that you, and you only, came to save me?"

"Shure, my lady, it was just because I happened to have a horse that was a bigger jumper than others, and I was able to take the brook. So don't say any more about it."

"I do not care what you say; you are unwilling to

acknowledge your own merits. But you have behaved like a hero, and I shall always look on you as a hero."

She spoke fervently—passionately even—quite carried away by her feelings.

Still pale, and with hair dishevelled, she stood with clasped hands in the road, regarding Scatterbrain with a look full of gratitude.

"I only wish I could in any possible way prove to you my gratitude—how I appreciate your noble conduct."

"Ah! now my lady, shure you're a fatter flatterer."

"No, no; I mean what I say. I never can be grateful enough. I might have been killed over and over again for anything Captain Maitland or such as he would have done to save me," she went on.

At this moment the sound of approaching hoof-falls was heard.

The rest of the field had ridden round to a bridge, and now came at full gallop to the scene of what most thought a terrible tragedy.

"Here come the other gentlemen," said Scatterbrain. "Now, my lady, if you want to please me, I'll tell you what you can do."

"Name it, only name it," she cried, fervently.

"Well, then, just take another drink of cognac from my flask—shake hands and say you forgive me for making such a fool of myself this morning. But sure I didn't know any better."

Half laughing, half crying, she took the flask—placing it to her lips again—took a few sips; and while thus doing, several of the horsemen, including Captain Maitland came in sight.

Great was the astonishment and disgust of the latter, as he saw his fair *fiancée*, as he chose to think her, drinking from the Irish lord's flask. Greater still when he saw her give him her hand cordially, which the latter had the gallantry or the audacity to raise to his lips.

"D—n the fellow," said Maitland to himself, "this must be put a stop to."

CHAPTER VIII.

A FRACAS PREVENTED.

Now the young lady was quite aware that she and Lord Scatterbrain were in full view of the horsemen coming down the road, amongst whom she recognised Captain Maitland, Miss Grey, Jack Fulford, and others.

That to be seen drinking from his lordship's flask, and allowing him to kiss her hand, would create a great deal of surprise, and even provoke remark she well knew, but that did not trouble her.

Wilful, high-spirited, and independent, she did not feel a bit ashamed of letting her gratitude to the man who had rescued her be seen.

Naturally though so gay, and apparently careless in disposition, she had strong feelings, and was not ashamed to show them.

As the gentlemen and Miss Florence Grey came up, Scatterbrain, who hated the thought of being made conspicuous, said—

“Let us say as little as possible about this, your ladyship; shure it's no use making a fuss.”

By this time he had replaced the bit in the mouth of the runaway horse, and he himself was quite cool and collected.

Lady Jane, too, had recovered from her faintness, so that if she chose, it would be easy to pass off the affair as quite a trivial matter.

In another minute they were surrounded by eager sympathisers and questioners.

“Oh! faith it was just nothing at all of consequence,” remarked Scatterbrain; the lady's horse soon got tired of his prank, and was glad enough to be pulled up I'll warrant.”

“Indeed, gentlemen,” cried Lady Jane, “it was a very serious matter, I assure you. But for Lord Scatterbrain, I must have been instantly killed, as the horse was within a few yards of the steep bank there.”

“Ah! well,” said Captain Maitland, coolly, “you

should be more careful how you ride. Let me venture to hope that this fright will render you more cautious for the future, Lady Jane."

"Fright!" she exclaimed, "render me more cautious for the future? As if it were my fault."

She was too angry to trust herself to say more, but turned her back on the captain indignantly, and spoke to Jack Fulford.

"You are a pretty knight," she said, "for a lady, to desert your charge in the way you did."

"Perhaps it is fortunate for you that I did so," said Fulford, "you must acknowledge that when I made you over to Scatterbrain, I placed you in excellent hands."

"I scolded him well, Jane, I assure you," remarked Florence, "for leaving you after promising Colonel Vavasour to keep close to you. I think it was shameful."

At this moment the colonel came up, having with difficulty rejoined the hunt by taking a short cut through country lanes. He heard, as he came up, enough to inform him that there had been a most exciting adventure, very nearly a terrible accident, and that his niece was the heroine thereof.

"My dear Jane—what is all this—what has happened—what is the matter—how pale you look?"

"Nothing the matter now, uncle, though it was not so a few minutes back, I assure you. My horse ran away with me, and but for the courage and skill of Lord Scatterbrain, who came to my aid just in time, would have galloped with me over that steep bank, almost a precipice."

"Good heavens! what an escape. Lord Scatterbrain, on my behalf and on that of my niece, accept my sincere thanks."

Then Lady Jane proceeded to give a glowing and highly-coloured description of the whole affair, making out Scatterbrain to be indeed a veritable hero.

And afterwards the colonel heard from more than one of the Irish lord's plucky leap over the brook, and was shown the very place.

"You see it was a ticklish thing, colonel, his horse only just cleared it. Here are the marks of his hind hoofs close to the edge."

"Well, all I've got to say," remarked Colonel Vavasour, "he's a fine fellow, whether bumpkin or lord."

"Indeed, they say he's both," sneered Captain Maitland.

"I don't care a d—n, Maitland, he's a fine fellow, and saved Jane's life; he's welcome to a seat at my table, a stall for his horse in my stable, and to use my house as his own whenever he chooses."

"It seems to me, Colonel, that this affair has been a good deal exaggerated. I quite believe this young fellow did his best. There's no doubt he's well mounted and a good horseman; but so is many a groom. And you know how young ladies of a romantic turn of mind exaggerate any little incident."

As it happened, Jack Fulford heard the word groom mentioned in connection with his friend

"I beg your pardon, Captain Maitland, if I am mistaken," he said, "but did I hear you couple the name of my friend, Lord Scatterbrain, in an offensive manner with the word groom?"

"Really, sir," said Maitland, haughtily, "I do not know that I am compelled to remember and repeat everything I may say in conversation. Besides, I was addressing Colonel Vavasour, and even if you were not mistaken, and I did so couple your *noble friend's* name," and he laid sarcastic emphasis on the words, "it was but repeating what is matter of common talk."

"I request you to withdraw the expression," said Jack, turning pale, but with a dangerous look in his eye, which sufficiently showed that it was not through fear. "Indeed, I must insist upon your withdrawing the expression."

"I am not aware by what right you insist, or request, that I should do otherwise than exactly as I please," said Maitland, haughtily. "Nor what means you have to enforce such a claim."

"That's my business," answered Jack, edging his horse nearer to that of Maitland, and with a very dangerous gleam indeed in his eyes now—"Once again, I insist on the offensive expression being withdrawn."

It was now obvious to all, that there was mischief brewing, and there would probably be a fracas.

Captain Maitland, whatever his faults, did not lack personal courage, and as he was a bigger and a heavier man than Fulford, had no fear on his own behalf.

Colonel Vavasour, who heard all, however, did what he could to prevent the scandal of a row in the hunting field.

"Maitland, I think you are in the wrong, you certainly spoke in a disparaging manner of Lord Scatterbrain, and I, for my part, really think he has behaved very well, with great pluck and judgment. So just say a word retracting the expression groom, as applied to him, for whatever he may be, he is not that."

At this moment Lord Scatterbrain and Lady Jane Vavasour were seen approaching, riding side by side.

Captain Maitland, though not wanting in courage, had also no lack of prudence. He saw that to force a row now, and insist on maintaining the offensive word, would be to make Lady Jane his bitter enemy. In effect it would bring her into the arms of Scatterbrain, so to speak, of whom he was already absurdly jealous.

She would be sure to champion him, and take his part, that he well knew, and turning all this over in his mind, he rapidly decided what to do.

"Well, Captain Fulford," he said, laughing, "I did not think any one would take words, said in a jest, as serious. Since, however, you do so, I willingly retract anything I have said which could be construed as offensive to Lord Scatterbrain."

Jack Fulford, satisfied, but still sore and angry, bowed stiffly, and turning his horse's head rode to meet Lady Jane and her cavalier.

CHAPTER IX.

AN INVITATION ACCEPTED.

THE adventure and deadly peril of Lady Jane Vavasour, put an end to the sport for that day.

During the excitement, in which even the huntsman and whips had participated, the hounds had been allowed to run at liberty.

The consequence was that the pack went off in a direction where there was no chance of the fox being taken, and when they were hallooed back, no trace of the fox could be found, the scent having probably got cold.

The nearest cover, where there was a chance of finding another, was six or seven miles distant, and thither the hounds, huntsman, whips, and a part of the field started.

But many, amongst them Fulford, Florence Grey, Scatterbrain, Colonel Vavasour, his niece, Captain Maitland, and others, had no taste for further sport that day.

And so they turned their horses' heads homewards.

After riding altogether for some three miles, the party came to cross roads, where it was necessary to separate.

Fulford, his cousin Florence, and Lord Scatterbrain going one way, Colonel Vavasour, Lady Jane, and Captain Maitland the other.

Before they separated Jack Fulford gave the colonel an invitation.

"Colonel," he said, "I know you are fond of cover shooting. I purpose to have a good day at the pheasants, in the wood I call the heath, on Wednesday, may I expect you, with your breech-loader?"

The colonel, for himself, accepted, and then, greatly to the annoyance, rage even of Captain Maitland, Fulford still further extended his invitation.

"And my cousin Florence tells me to ask you, as a particular favour, to bring Lady Jane with you, to keep her company while we are blazing away at the bir.

"I leave it entirely to the young lady herself," was the reply. "What do you say, Jane?"

"Oh! I shall be most happy, I am sure. I only wish it was the fashion, in this country, for ladies to shoot as well as ride."

Now, Captain Maitland was not included in the invitation, and his anger may well be imagined, although after what had occurred, he could scarcely have expected to be asked.

But he thought that Lady Jane ought to have refused, as he was not invited, and presently, his anger getting the better of his prudence, he took an opportunity to tell her so.

"Captain Maitland," cried the young lady, her eyes flashing indignantly, "by what right do you presume to dictate to me what I ought and ought not to do; to tell me what invitations I may accept, and what I should refuse? You have great assurance to imagine that I am so intensely fond of your company as to refuse because you are not invited. It is not so, I can assure you. Indeed, I should be all the more ready to accept from the fact of your not being asked."

She had never spoken so plainly before, never given him so direct and pointed a rebuff.

He turned deadly pale, and ground his teeth, but said not a word.

Indeed, he saw that he had gone too far, and was well aware that if he pressed her too hard or tried to coerce her, she would defy and repudiate him altogether.

"This is all through that accursed bumpkin of an Irishman," he muttered. "It's a pity he did not break his neck; a pity the days of duelling are over. Ah! if it were possible, now-a-days, could I not put a bullet through his thick head?"

No more was said until they reached home. Colonel Vavasour attributing his niece's silence and gloom to the effects of her adventure.

Our friends, Jack Fulford, Lord Scatterbrain, and Florence Grey, rode home in much better humour, talking merrily all the way.

Scatterbrain seemed to have lost all shyness and *mauvais honte* under the excitement of the day.

But his brogue broke out afresh, and Fulford felt somewhat discouraged at finding so bad a relapse in his pupil.

But barring this, the day's adventure seemed wonderfully to have improved Scatterbrain. The charming manner in which Lady Jaue had behaved to him after he had saved her, compensated a hundredfold for the slight mortification he received at her hands in the morning.

He was on good terms with himself, and no longer felt shy and constrained with Miss Grey.

It is a certain fact, that to put people at their ease, to make rapid acquaintances—even friendships, there is nothing like the hunting field.

There the farmer, on his only horse, used alike for hack, dog cart, and hunter, speaks to the squire, the local magistrate, the master of the hounds, even a peer of the realm.

The sport brings them to a level. They are all fox-hunters—and as such meet on terms of equality.

And, indeed, this is almost necessarily so. For, without the cordial aid of the farmers in preserving foxes, there would be no fox-hunting.

May I never live to see that day—disastrous to all sportsmen—and to England itself, as a nation, I believe.

This day was the first on which Lord Scatterbrain had ever dined with ladies in the style of English society.

Although there was no one but themselves, Jack Fulford insisted on dress, and Scatterbrain appeared in a black suit of faultless cut (Fulford had taken care that he had the advantage of the best tailor London could boast of, no other than the unapproachable —), dress shirt, and white tie—together his appearance was, as Florence owned to herself, quite unexceptionable.

As for that young lady, Jack Fulford thought he had never seen her look so lovely or so becomingly dressed. A dark dress, trimmed with black lace, contrasted well with her dazzling white shoulders and arms—bare as is the modern fashion, greatly abused by the modern censors, but for all that, the most becoming mode possible, and the one which best shews off the beauties of the woman.

So thought Jack Fulford and Scatterbrain both.

The dinner passed very well, indeed; and strange to say, Scatterbrain did not make a single mistake.

Fulford did not care for wine after dinner that day, and as his friend was of the same mind, they rose with the ladies, and adjourned to the drawing-room.

Now Jack did not think to explain to his friend that this was unusual in English society, and the consequence was, that Scatterbrain thought it was the general custom, and through this he afterwards fell into a sad blunder, and got a good deal laughed at.

After spending an hour with the ladies over coffee and tea, the two gentlemen adjourned to the billiard-room, in the mysteries of which scientific game Fulford had already instructed his friend.

Of course, Jack gave points, but, though greatly the better player, he lost.

They only played for half-crowns, but the fact of winning put Scatterbrain in a good humour, and Jack, on the other hand, was annoyed.

He had the true instinct of a gambler, and if it had been any other than a friend, he would have tried to take his revenge by playing for heavy stakes.

Hitherto, nothing has been said of Captain Fulford's propensity for betting.

But with him it had been a passion ever since, as almost a boy, he entered the army.

CHAPTER X.

PLEASANT DAYS AT WOODFORD GRANGE.

LORD SCATTERBRAIN very soon got quite at home and at his ease at Woodford Grange, and visibly he began to throw off that awkwardness and shyness in the presence of ladies which had at first troubled him.

It was an artificial shyness, for his lordship, like most of his countrymen, had naturally an excellent manner with the fair sex—with quite impudence enough.

But the consciousness of his own defects, and his now exalted position, weighed down his spirits, and acted like a wet blanket on his conversation.

After a bit, however, when he found that neither Florence Grey nor her aunt laughed at him, or seemed even to notice the brogue which he could not keep under do what he would, he gathered courage, and from being diffident and silent—anything but good company—he grew quite talkative and amusing.

He had an abundance of native wit, and especially excelled in telling droll anecdotes of his own country, which were improved and enriched by the brogue.

Florence was wonderfully taken with the somewhat uncouth, yet good natured, good tempered Irish lord, and laughed unrestrainedly *with* him, not *at* him—which makes all the difference.

Altogether, Scatterbrain was in clover. There was hunting, coursing, and shooting wherewith to pass the days; dinner and a pleasant chat afterwards; followed by tea and coffee in the drawing-room, and this, again, followed by the adjournment of the two gentlemen to the billiard-room, where, as a rule, Jack Fulford would win sundry half-crowns of his friend and pupil, to his great delight, for Jack was a gambler at heart, and hated losing, whether a shilling or hundreds of pounds.

Scatterbrain, however, was an apt scholar—he had a good eye and a steady hand, and gained on his host by rapid marches, till, at the last, Jack, who began by giving him fifty points out of a hundred, could hardly cede ten and win.

“I tell you what it is, Scatterbrain,” he said, after a very hard-fought game, which the Irishman was within one point of winning, “you are getting too good at billiards for me. You’ll soon be my master, I reckon. I must give you up at the game, and try you at something else. I taught you the rudiments of *ecarté*, didn’t I, when we were on the continent?”

“Faith, and you did; and a fairly good game it is. But, for a choice, give me cribbage.”

“For heaven’s sake don’t talk about cribbage in polite society, Scatterbrain,” cried Fulford, laughing, “it would

be an unpardonable *gaucherie*. Not but that it is a very capital game. But that, all fours, put, and some others are, for certain unknown reasons, tabooed, and never even spoken of. *Ecarté*, whist, loo, *vingt-et-un*, and some few others, are the only fashionable games with cards, except, perhaps, 'bliud hookey,'—a terribly gambling game, only played, as a rule, by young men, reckless and eager for strong excitement of some kind."

"Ah, now, that's just my case—sure I want excitement, and I'm a young man. Teach me the game, and we'll play. Is it hard to learn?"

"Hard to learn," replied Jack Fulford, laughing, "it's about the simplest game of cards—a game of pure chance—that I know. But as to teaching you, I doubt if I should be doing you a good turn. I knew a man of decent fortune, fond of sporting and betting, and who always held his own in his wagers on horse-racing, and at whist or loo played for high stakes,—well, this man, being at Newmarket one Cesarewitch meeting, saw them playing hazard in the subscription-rooms at night. He did not understand the game, but was infected by the excitement of the players, the rattle of the dice on the green-baized table, the rustle of the crisp bank-notes, and the golden clink of the sovereigns as they changed hands. He determined to learn the game—the mysteries of 'seven's the main, and a nick,' 'five to seven,' 'four to seven,' 'two to one, the thrower throws out,'—and so on. He did learn the game, and became an ardent devotee at that most deadly and fascinating shrine. At first he lost; then he played carefully, betted judiciously, and won. Then he played higher, and began to lose again. At last, it grew such a passion with him that he was not happy if he could not indulge in his favourite excitement. There were plenty of men in London willing to oblige him—professional gamblers, against whom he must lose in the long run, although he was by no means a fool—shrewd even. The result is soon told, though it took two years to accomplish. He lost, at first, considerably, but slowly; afterwards, considerably, but rapidly. And then he grew desperate, and played for higher stakes—hundreds—thousands even. And

then came the grand crash. He mortgaged and sold everything to minister to this his fatal passion. And when he could mortgage no more, he borrowed from any one who would lend—and finally, this man, originally of a fair estate—he had at least two thousand a year—was arrested for a debt of twenty pounds, taken to prison, and only obtained his release by going through the insolvent court. What became of him after he was released no one knows. He disappeared—was never seen. Some say he went abroad—others that he committed suicide. Be that as it may, the fact remains, the man was ruined, and by that fatal, desperate, terribly fascinating—hazard.”

“Ah, well! then you shall teach it to me, as well as blind hookey. Trust me, I will not be ruined.”

Fulford was reluctant, but Scatterbrain was determined, and he had to yield.

Blind hookey was soon learned; but the game of hazard was more complicated, and required greater effort both of mind and memory in order to comprehend and remember the odds.

After this, Scatterbrain would often be seen practising by himself—throwing out the dice on the green cloth of the billiard-table, making his left hand bank—his right, the thrower. And this he kept up until he was thoroughly conversant with the manner of playing, the rules, and the correct odds with any particular main and chance.

Fulford wondered a good deal, and chaffed Scatterbrain unmercifully, asking if the latter meant to start a gambling saloon in London, &c.

But the Irishman bore it all good-humouredly, and, after a couple of days' practice, both at hazard, blind hookey, and *ecarté*, he challenged his host to play him at all three.

Jack laughingly accepted, and the result was as follows: Fulford won the game of *ecarté*, but at hazard and blind hookey—the time for each was limited to half-an-hour, the stakes to shillings—Scatterbrain was a considerable winner.

Fulford rose from the table a great deal surprised,

and a little annoyed, at being beaten by a perfect tyro.

The morning following this victory of pupil over teacher was the day on which Colonel Vavasour and his fair niece, the Lady Jane, were expected—the former to help shoot the pheasants, the latter to keep company with Florence Grey and her aunt while the gentlemen were banging away in the covers.

Scatterbrain did excellently well, save that he made a few mistakes, blazing away at hen and cock pheasant alike, despite of the keeper's warning cry, "'Ware hen!"

As the colonel and his niece and the clergyman, a high church, aristocratic parson, with his wife and daughters, were to stay to dinner, his lordship felt a little nervous.

This would be his first regular dinner party, in English society, with strangers.

He had become accustomed to Florence and her aunt; but he had a terrible dread of making himself ridiculous in the eyes of the ladies by some blunder, forgetfulness, or breach of *etiquette*.

Especially did he dread the thought of making himself laughable in the eyes of Lady Jane Vavasour—for whose good opinion he was very anxious.

He took extra pains about his dress, and, so far, the most fastidious could not find fault with him—thanks to Jack Fulford and the London tailor.

His hands were white, and by no means badly shaped—notwithstanding his antecedents; his nails well trimmed—and, so far as his exterior went, he was quite *comme il faut*.

However, he funked it, and took care to prime himself before entering the drawing-room, with a couple of glasses of champagne.

"Ah! Lord Scatterbrain, I am so glad you have come," cried the quick-witted and generous Florence, who, wishing to put him at his ease, went to meet him directly he entered, and, taking his arm, led him up the room, "you can decide a disputed point for us."

Scatterbrain, pleased and flattered, as what man

would not be, under such circumstances, smiled and bowed.

"Oh! but I forgot, you have not yet been introduced to the Reverend Mr. Fairclough, Mrs. Fairclough, and these young ladies, their daughters. Allow me to have the honour."

Then, with great tact, Florence introduced him to the clergyman and his family.

Now, the daughters who prided themselves on their exclusiveness and high breeding, being the grandchildren of an earl, were surprised, perhaps a little disappointed, at the quiet gentlemanly manner in which Lord Scatterbrain underwent the ceremony.

No one accustomed to good society from his childhood up, would have done better than did our friend; thanks to Florence Grey, whose tact and consideration had put him at his ease.

Not satisfied with this, she remained with him talking, and presently Lady Jane Vavasour joined them, and a quiet and animated discussion ensued as to the respective merits of English and Irish horses for hunting purposes.

Scatterbrain was at home here, and soon forgot all about his awkwardness, and conversed with ease and intelligence on a subject he so well understood, until the footman appeared, and announced that dinner was on the table.

Jack Fulford offered his arm to his cousin Florence, and Scatterbrain, after hesitating just for one brief moment, from a lingering relic of diffidence, advanced to Lady Jane Vavasour.

"May I have the honour Lady Jane?" he said, as he offered his arm.

She accepted it with a smile, and thinking to herself—

"Really this Irish lord is not so bad. I was afraid he would be so odious that I could not help hating him, although he rendered me so great a service, even saved my life."

The dinner passed pleasantly enough. Scatterbrain having been well schooled, got on very well. Fortunately for him he was placed between Lady Jane and Florence Grey, the latter of whom had taken quite

a liking for her cousin's friend, and did all she could to free him from embarrassment, and if needful, with watchful eye, to correct any mistake he might make.

He made one—one only—that evening. It caused Lady Jane to smile, and the parson's daughters looked disdainful, but that was all.

Hitherto there had been no formal dinner, although everybody dressed, and the ladies, at Fulford's suggestion, had remained at dessert longer than usual, so that in fact—all—Jack, Scatterbrain, Florence, and her aunt rose at the same time and adjourned to the drawing room.

Now, on this one point, Fulford had forgotten to instruct his friend, and the consequence was, that when the ladies rose from table a quarter of an hour after the cloth was removed, Scatterbrain did the same, opened the door, held it open, until Lady Jane, who was the last had passed out, and then quietly followed and joined them in the drawing room.

However, fortunately, he did not know he had done wrong. It is a well known fact that any one talks better, and is generally on better terms with the company and himself, after dinner and a certain amount of good wine.

So it was with Scatterbrain.

He was really quite amusing, even witty, and were it not for that terrible brogue which would peep out, no one would have supposed that his education, even from learning to read, only began a year or so back.

And thus, with the exception of this little incident, which only provoked a smile, and was speedily forgotten, every thing went "merry as a marriage bell," for Scatterbrain, and he rose several degrees in the favour of Lady Jane Vavasour, a fact which he cared more for than half his estates, for to tell the truth, his lordship was more than half in love with that charming young lady.

CHAPTER XI.

GIRLISH CONFIDENCES.

THIS was altogether a day of triumph for Scatterbrain. Everything had gone well with him, and even his mistake had passed with but little notice.

And before the night closed in he had yet another slice of luck.

It had been gloomy and threatening weather all the afternoon, but about sundown it came on to snow hard, and continued, without intermission, until long past ten o'clock, when Lady Jane and her uncle thought about starting for home.

It was fine when they left, and the young lady who greatly preferred to be driven in a mail phaeton behind two capital horses to being cooped up in a close brougham persuaded her uncle to adopt the former conveyance.

And the result was, that everyone declared it to be utterly impossible to leave Woodford Grange that night.

Lady Jane was rather pleased than otherwise, as she liked the thought of a dressing-room gossip before a good fire, with Florence, better than that of a long drive home.

The colonel soon yielded to the representations of his host, and agreed to make the best of it.

"I can find everything you want, Colonel Vavasour," Fulford said, "and as to Lady Jane, why I'll guarantee that Florence and my aunt can furnish her with every possible requisite for a lady's toilette and dress."

"Well, well, so be it," said the colonel, good humouredly. "Ah, Jane, this is your doing. I do believe that you anticipated the snow storm and that we should be pressed to stay here all night. Lord Scatterbrain, beware of her. I'm afraid she has designs on your heart. She is a dangerous young lady, I can tell you."

Scatterbrain looked foolish, and Lady Jane coloured up crimson, as at that very moment she herself, seated on an ottoman, was leaning forward, one hand on the arm of Scatterbrain's chair, listening with apparently the greatest interest, to what he was saying.

In fact he was telling one of his Irish anecdotes, and evidently well, too, or Lady Jane would not have displayed so much interest, for she was not one to pretend what she did not feel, for politeness sake.

The colonel's badinage caused all eyes to be turned on them in a moment.

Lady Jane was too proud to change her position because she was observed, but could not prevent the conscious blush from appearing on her face.

"I wonder what Captain Maitland would say if he could behold his fair *fiancée* now," said one of the Miss Faircloughs. "Quite a charming pair they would make, I declare. Viscount Scatterbrain has a fine fortune and property, too, I am told.

Lady Jane heard part of this, and knew that the amiable young lady was speaking of her. By an effort she recovered her self-possession, and in a spirit of defiance rose.

"Lord Scatterbrain, I want you to teach me to play at billiards. Uncle," she said, turning to the colonel, "don't **you** think billiards a very nice indoor game for ladies? I declare if ever I have a house of my own I will have the drawing-room open into a conservatory, and beyond the conservatory there shall be a billiard-room."

"A very excellent arrangement," said Scatterbrain, with more zeal than prudence. "I haven't a billiard-room at Ballysmashem Castle, but I'll order one to be fitted up directly. I'm very fond of billiards, it's a fine game."

Of course this unlucky speech did not pass without remark.

"How very thoughtful of him," said Miss Lucretia Fairclough to her sister; "you see he is already beginning to prepare his Irish Castle for his future wife."

This time Lady Jane coloured up from annoyance.

She was angry with Scatterbrain, and as to avoid further remark she drew her arm within that of Florence, she said—

"After all, a man not accustomed to society is a dreadful bore—tiresome and annoying beyond measure."

"I hope you don't mean Scatterbrain?" Florence cried, hastily.

"Indeed I do."

"Why, what harm has he done you? I shall take his part—I like him."

"What has he done? Why, did you not hear that last ridiculous speech of his? As if he was going to have a billiard-room made at his place in Ireland, because I had said I would have one when I had a house of my own. You must see what it implied; and those Fairclough girls too, eagerly catching up every word."

"What, that you and Scatterbrain were going to make a match of it? Oh! what fun," cried Florence.

"Fun, indeed," exclaimed Lady Jane, hotly. "I see no fun in it. If it were not so utterly absurd—so inconceivably preposterous—so impossible even—I should be angry instead of only annoyed."

"Preposterous, impossible, I really do not see it in that light. There is no earthly reason why you should marry him or anybody else, unless you choose to do so of your own free will. But I really don't see anything preposterous in the idea—to say nothing of impossible."

"Florence, are you mad? what are you talking of? Marry Lord Scatterbrain!"

"Why not, if you so choose? He has a title, an old name, and a good estate. He is a gentleman born."

"Born, but not bred," put in Lady Jane, sharply.

"Granted. But good breeding, the manners of good society, etiquette and such things are soon learned. In proof whereof I need not go further than Lord Scatterbrain himself."

"But he is totally uneducated. I hear that three years ago he could not read."

"The more to his credit for being able to read and even speak correctly now."

"I won't talk to you any more," cried Lady Jane, pettishly; "come, let us go to the billiard-room, or those horrid Fairclough girls will think I am annoyed, and have gone up-stairs to cry."

"As to your being annoyed, they would be right, I think," replied the more quiet and less impetuous Florence. "I declare I never saw you in such a temper. And about such a trifle too."

"Trifle, ah! Well let us talk about something else. I will appear as if I were not in the least vexed, at all events."

And in this Lady Jane succeeded to perfection, and poor Scatterbrain dreamed not of the angry thoughts and words his unlucky speech had given rise to.

Her ladyship played the rôle of a light-hearted coquettish young lady to perfection, and even the Misses Fairclough could detect no signs of annoyance in her demeanour.

"Oh!" said one of the sisters, "it is plain enough—you see she does not seek to disguise it. She has obviously laid herself out deliberately for this ignorant boor of a lord, with his estates and thirty thousand a year. No doubt, she made the colonel, her uncle, fish for an invitation here."

"Yes, it seems like it," replied sister Lucretia. "Do you think her pretty, Claribel?"

"Pretty," exclaimed the latter, who was a very decided brunette—"a sandy-haired wax-doll of a thing."

"Lord Scatterbrain is obviously smitten," remarked the other—"just watch him. His eyes follow her wherever she goes."

"I pity his taste," replied Claribel—"but, bah! what can you expect from an ignorant lout of a bog-trotter—a bumpkin—a boor."

* * * * *

That night, as Lady Jane and Florence Grey were sitting together in their dressing gowns, and with hair dishevelled, and slippered unstockinged feet on the fender, Florence said suddenly—

"Are you still of the same opinion about Scatterbrain?"

"Of course, I am," was the reply. "The idea of mentioning my name in connection with his, was so preposterous, that I could not be really angry—only a little bit vexed.

"When, at the risk of his life, he saved yours"—said Florence earnestly, and laying her hands on the arm of her friend—"when he leaped the brook, which none of the others dare attempt—when he galloped after your horse, and just in time, arrested him in his mad career, thereby saving you from certain death—did you say to him—stand back—boor—bumpkin—do not presume to approach me?"

Lady Jane coloured up. She had been hit hard. She stammered a few words. Then she tried vainly to laugh.

And then she burst into tears.

CHAPTER XII.

NEWS OF KING LAMBTON.

THERE was a rapid thaw during the night, the snow-storm merging into sleet, then, the wind shifting to the south-west, there came rain, and when Fulford and Scatterbrain were called, at eight o'clock, they were informed, to their agreeable surprise, that it was a hunting morning.

The meet was an excellent one, some twelve miles distant, and Jack Fulford, entering his friend's room, laid it down as law that the opportunity must not be missed, and that Colonel Vavasour and his daughter, both devotees of the chase, would forgive them starting at ten o'clock, leaving their guests to the care of Florence and her aunt.

Lord Scatterbrain was an ardent sportsman, but on this occasion it must be acknowledged that he would not have been very much vexed if the snow had held, so as to detain the fair Lady Jane, or at all events render

hunting impossible—in which latter case he would have had the pleasure of her company up to the moment of departure.

At nine o'clock the party met at the breakfast-table. The ladies were first, and his Lordship of Scatterbrain made his appearance last.

Either he had been slow to rise, or had taken unusual pains with his toilette.

He and Fulford were in hunting costume—scarlet coats, cords, and top boots—about as becoming and picturesque a costume, well fitted on a well-shaped man, as it is possible to conceive.

Whatever might be the shortcomings of Scatterbrain, awkwardness in gait was not one of them; he walked and carried himself easily, and without the slightest trace of clumsiness.

Lady Jane Vavasour could not help owing to herself, as she looked at the Irish lord, that there was nothing of the bumpkin in his appearance and carriage, however he might occasionally betray himself in his speech.

She had recovered her good humour, and forgotten all about her discussion with Florence of the previous night.

The chief causes of irritation, the Fairclough girls, who, she knew, regarded her with envious and ill-natured eyes, were gone, and she could now speak, and be spoken to, without every word being eagerly caught up whenever there was a possibility, and made a peg whereon to hang an insinuation.

All were in good spirits, and conversation was brisk and pleasant, when the servant entered with the post-bag.

"Any for me, Jack?" asked Florence of her cousin.

"Oh, of course—two or three," he replied, tossing them across the table to her. "I never knew such a girl for correspondents. You must be wonderfully fond of the vapid nonsense and gossip with which ladies fill their letters."

"How do you know they are from ladies at all, sir?" replied Florence, with a sly smile.

"I judge by the handwriting—all slopes and angles," said Fulford, opening a letter addressed to himself.

"Hulloa!" he exclaimed, "here's a letter from Lambton Leroy. You remember Leroy, Florence? He was at Eton with me—King Lambton, we used to call him, treating his surname as though it were spelt *Le roi*, and translating it into King."

"What, that madman who leaped his horse over the parapet of Lambton Buzzard Bridge, and swam him half-a-mile down the river, for a wager?"

"The same. It was a wonderful exploit. I wouldn't have done it. What do you say, Scatterbrain, of a man who rides his horse at the parapet of a bridge, with a clear drop of thirty feet into the river below, and then swims him over half-a-mile down the stream—and in the middle of winter, too?"

"By my faith, I should say that the man had plenty of pluck—his heart in the right place."

"More courage than sense," said Florence, looking up from her letter-reading to join in the conversation. "His heart may be all right, as Lord Scatterbrain says, but decidedly his head is all wrong. A perfect madman!"

"But nevertheless, Miss Flo', you danced with the madman four times, at the hunt ball at Lambton Buzzard."

"Oh! I couldn't help it," replied Florence, laughing. "I was afraid, you see. Don't you know that it is exceedingly dangerous to refuse mad people anything they ask?"

Here was a chance for Scatterbrain, and he did not let it slip.

"If such a state will ensure the acceptance of every request, the granting of every favour—by Jove! I'll go mad to-morrow."

Everybody laughed, and Fulford cried,

"Bravo, Scatterbrain! What do you say, Florence? Is he to go mad?"

"Oh! perhaps he has not far to go," she replied.

"Had you there, my lord," remarked his friend. "I tell you, if you cross swords with my cousin in an encounter of wit, you'll have all your work to do to hold your own."

"Really and truly," thought Lady Jane, "Scatterbrain is not at all a fool. No one could have worded an extravagant compliment better than he did, when he offered to go mad for Florence's sake. He certainly improves on acquaintance."

And then came the memory of that fearful time, when her horse, mad with terror, was tearing along with headlong speed towards the steep bank, where, but for Scatterbrain, she must have met her death.

"I really begin quite to like him," she said to herself; "but of course that is only natural. I should be ungrateful indeed if I had not kindly feelings towards one who saved my life."

"Well, now, seriously, Florence," said Jack Fulford, after perusing the letter he had received, "I mean to invite Lambton Leroy over here. He is an excellent fellow; a bit wild, but good company, and always full of fun and humour. He'll just suit you, Scatterbrain—a restless, rollicking fellow, fond of sentiment, never still, always on the move, always planning or doing something—in fact, emphatically a jolly fellow. What do you say, Florence—don't you think he and his friend will be an addition to our circle?"

"Oh! there is a friend in the case, is there," replied Florence, looking up from her letters; "what about him?"

"He says nothing, except that he has a friend with him. But I will read you his letter.—

"MY DEAR FULFORD,—I am coming down into your neighbourhood, and shall stay a week at least. I shall see you, no doubt, at the meet of the hounds, as I have sent a couple of horses down. I have some business in the neighbourhood, which may detain me over a week. You know, I have some property down in this part of the world. It is heavily timbered, so I am going to mark some few hundreds of the trees for the axe. I have a friend with me, so we shall put up at the 'Crown and Thistle' at Lambton Buzzard. Hoping you are well,

"Yours truly,

"LAMBTON LEROY."

"If King Lambton thinks I am going to allow him to put up at an hotel within seven miles of my place, he is very much mistaken. Send James to me directly," he said to the servant, and then rising, he took his seat at a writing table in the corner of the room.

"I will write a note, and send it at once," he said—"that will be the best way—eh! Florence?"

So Fulford wrote—

"DEAR LEROY,—You and your friend must come over here. I have sent the double dog-cart, so that there may be room for your luggage. As for your horses, I have ordered my man James to bring them on at once here, and have sent with him a boy, who will wait with the "waggon" for you and friend. You need not write—but bring your own news—for come you must and shall.

"Yours truly,

"JOHN FULFORD."

"Well, if that isn't taking a man by storm," said Lady Jane, laughing, "I don't know what is. You order his horses to be sent over here before even he arrives in the neighbourhood."

"Nothing like promptitude in these cases—eh! Florence?"

He had got quite into a habit of late of consulting his cousin on every possible occasion—which to her was somewhat embarrassing.

And yet she liked it in her heart, saying to herself, "He looks on me as a sister, and asks my opinion in a brotherly way."

And yet somehow this brother-and-sister view of the matter did not quite please her, though she would not own it even to herself.

"Oh! yes. I quite agree with you; and also I will go so far as to admit that your friend, Mr. Leroy, will be an addition to our somewhat limited circle. Jane, you must come over some day in the week," she said, turning to her friend, "and make the acquaintance of my cousin's friend and schoolfellow."

"No, indeed," replied Lady Jane. "It is your turn to visit us. Is it not uncle?"

"Undoubtedly," replied the colonel; "and I need scarcely say how welcome you will be."

"Then that is settled. Mr. Fulford, we shall expect you and Lord Scatterbrain—your cousin and aunt, with this Mr. Leroy and his friend, at the earliest opportunity."

"Leroy, Leroy," said Colonel Vavasour, "let me see,—there is a young fellow in my regiment gazetted just after Maitland—I wonder if it is the same. Do you know whether he came of a Devonshire family, Captain Fulford, this friend of yours?"

"Yes, the Leroy's of Hurlstone Hall, one of the oldest families in the west of England."

"I know that Leroy was in a cavalry regiment, but resigned on account of some scrape or other."

"Exactly so—that's the man—a mad-cap, reckless, but by no means bad sort of fellow," replied the colonel, "always in some confounded scrape or other; but, as a rule, always getting clear off—a lucky fellow—extravagant, brave, and good hearted."

"So you will promise to come, Captain Fulford? Florence must write and name an early day."

Fulford looked serious and doubtful.

"Well, you see, Lady Jane, there are difficulties in the way."

"Difficulties—nonsense. I don't know what you mean."

"I will explain. You are aware that I and Captain Maitland had some words the other day—the day your horse bolted, and there was so nearly a disaster."

"Oh! nonsense—ridiculous. It is not to be thought of, that a few hot words in the hunting field are to be the ground of a permanent quarrel, a quarrel which not only affects the two gentlemen concerned, but for which their friends and relatives must suffer also."

"Really, Lady Jane——"

"Now, don't talk nonsense, Captain Fulford. I tell you I will not allow it. Why, do you not see the result? If you insist on being on bad terms with uncle's guest and friend, Captain Maitland, of course your cousin cannot

come to see me. All sorts of complications would arise, if at every slight misunderstanding between two men in the hunting field, whole families were forced to take up the affair, and range themselves on one side or the other. I tell you it shall not be so. I, Lady Jane Vavasour, say so."

She assumed an air of playful authority, and spoke with mock solemnity.

But Jack Fulford still held back.

"It is not altogether my quarrel," he said. "You see Captain Maitland spoke disrespectfully of my friend, Lord Scatterbrain, and that I was bound to resent."

"I'm sure Lord Scatterbrain is able to be his own champion. Are you not, my lord?"

"I hope so, Lady Jane," replied the Irishman.

"But Lord Scatterbrain was not present," urged Fulford, "and therefore could not be his own champion."

"Captain Maitland withdrew the offensive words," remarked Colonel Vavasour.

"Then I am sure Lord Scatterbrain will forgive any disrespectful words which Captain Maitland might have used in a careless moment."

"Faith," replied his lordship, laughing good humouredly, "I've had a good many disrespectful words spoken to me, and had many a disrespectful kick and thump before I knew I was a lord. It would be strange indeed, if I wouldn't oblige the Lady Jane," and he looked like one to the manner born, "in such a trifling matter, and besides I'm not one to bear malice."

Everybody laughed at such a frank avowal, Lady Jane was especially delighted, and more than ever pleased with Scatterbrain—not for the compliment, but for the frank good-humoured way in which he agreed with her view of the matter.

"Thank you, Lord Scatterbrain. You are a gentleman, and, I am glad to see, not such a churl as to nourish evil thoughts in your heart."

Scatterbrain coloured up. He had never before been so flatteringly addressed.

The bumpkin lord was especially singled out for praise

by one of the most beautiful and aristocratic ladies in the county, and called a gentleman, a word dearer to him than a ducal title.

"Well, I suppose I must yield," said Fulford, smiling, "had it been my own quarrel I should not have hesitated for a moment."

"Yield! I should think so," cried Lady Jane, "I tell what I shall do, Mr. Jack Fulford—I won't call you Captain Fulford—I mean to take you down a little," pursued the vivacious Lady Jane, "you are not a captain now, you have left the army."

"Once a captain always a captain, is it not so, Colonel Vavasour?" said Florence, taking her cousin's part.

"It is so ruled," replied the colonel, who in his quiet way enjoyed this wordy war, "but strictly, perhaps, it is not so."

"Well, *Mister* Jack Fulford," pursued the irrepressible Lady Jane, "I tell you what I shall do, and dare you to refuse obedience."

"I await your highness's orders," said Fulford, bowing.

"I shall make Captain Maitland drive me over here some day, and then I shall order you two to shake hands. And if you dare refuse—why then—then I will——"

She hesitated as if unable to hit upon a suitable punishment for the moment.

"I await to hear my doom in case of refusal," said Fulford, again bowing with mock humility.

"Lord Scatterbrain, will you do me a favour?" she asked, suddenly turning towards him.

"I will, Lady Jane," he replied, promptly.

"Will you promise me to grant the next request I make of you?"

"I will if it is in my power," again replied Scatterbrain, not perceiving that he was falling into a trap, or guessing at the nature of the request Lady Jane would make.

"You promise on your word as an Irish gentleman to do the next thing I order you to do?"

"I promise, if it is in my power," replied Scatterbrain, upon whose ears the words "Irish gentleman" fell like sweet music, especially from her lips.

"There, now, I have you, Mister Jack Fulford. I shall bring Captain Maitland over here, and if you refuse to shake hands I shall claim the redemption of Lord Scatterbrain's plighted word, and order him to give the one who refuses a sound thrashing, and if both refuse I shall order him to thrash you both.

"I yield, I yield!" cried Fulford, "I believe I would shake hands with his Satanic Majesty in person, rather than stand up to be knocked down by Scatterbrain's brawny arms."

A burst of hearty laughter greeted the triumph of Lady Jane, amidst which she left the room, crying "Victory, victory, I thought I would bring you to reason, Captain Fulford."

CHAPTER XIII.

A HUNTING MORNING.

FLORENCE GREY and her aunt followed the vivacious young lady who had just so signally discomfited Jack Fulford, leaving the three gentlemen in the breakfast-room.

Scatterbrain was flattered and pleased at the attention Lady Jane had bestowed on him, and yet he felt half vexed at being led to make such a preposterous promise, on his word of honour as an Irish gentleman, too.

It struck him, not without reason, that if Fulford had been vindictive against Captain Maitland and had refused, he himself would be in a most embarrassing, even ridiculous position.

And yet there would be no joke in it under those circumstances; for he looked at it in a serious light, this pledging of his word.

He would have thrashed Maitland with the greatest pleasure, but how, in case of refusal on Fulford's part could he do the same to his best and dearest friend.

"Her ladyship got the best of both of us, Scatterbrain," said Fulford, laughing; "with all your native

Irish wit, you have no chance in a war of words, or in skilful *finesse*, with Lady Jane. I had not the most remote idea as to what she was going to make you promise."

"Faith, no more had I, or may I be d——d if I'd have spoken those same words."

"Nonsense," said Fulford, who saw that Scatterbrain looked upon it as a serious matter. "It was only her fun, she would have released you had you asked her."

"Ah! but that's just it. I couldn't ask her after pledging my word."

"And if she had held you to your promise, you'd have given me a thrashing, eh?"

"Of course I would. How the devil could I help it?" replied Scatterbrain.

Jack laughed; and Colonel Vavasour remarked, smiling—

"I think you are exceedingly well out of the scrape, Captain Fulford."

"I think so too. Oh, here you are, James," he said, addressing the man servant; "I want you to take this note over to Lambton Buzzard, with the double dog-cart. The boy Philip will go with you. I expect there will be some horses at the 'Crown and Thistle,' belonging to a friend of mine, Mr. Lambton Leroy, for whom the letter is; you will bring the horses on at once, leaving the boy with the dog-cart for the gentleman and his friend—you understand?"

"Perfectly, sir."

"Very good. Away you go, and send our horses round at once. Come, Scatterbrain, one glass of cherry-brandy, and then to horse and away."

But just at this moment Lady Jane re-entered the room.

"Uncle," she cried, "I want to go and see the meet, and you must take me."

"The deuce I must! On my back?"

"No; don't be ridiculous. You must drive me and Florence over."

"Out of the question. It is too much for the horses, to drive them to the meet, nearly thirteen miles, and back—a good twenty-five miles—and then home."

"But you need not use your horses. They can rest in the stable till we come back, you know. Captain Fulford will lend us two of his horses, will you not?" she asked, appealing to him.

"I shall be only too happy," he replied.

"I do not like driving strange horses, and besides, I am hardly up to the mark to-day," said the colonel.

"Oh, how tiresome! What shall I do? I have a good mind to cry."

"Come, Lady Jane, I think I can help you—and I have a surprise for you, Florence. I told you I was going to make you a present of a pony-chaise and pair of ponies. They came home last night, but I would not let you see them until they had been tried, to make sure they were sound, and good enough for you. They have been out this morning, and Robert the groom gives me the very best account of them—quiet, handsome, and fast. Now, if you like, I will order them to be sent round. We will go on at a gentle pace, Florence knows the road, and you will doubtless soon overtake us."

"Oh! charming! delightful!" cried Lady Jane. "Captain Fulford, I declare you are charming."

"And only a few minutes back you were going to employ Scatterbrain to thrash me."

"You have made your submission, and are forgiven, that is enough for you, I should think. Here are your horses, mount and away. We will soon overtake you—unless you gallop."

"Which I don't think is very likely, going to meet the hounds," replied Fulford. "So, for the present, adieu."

They mounted and rode away, Scatterbrain gallant, taking off his hunting-cap and saluting the ladies just before they passed out of sight.

"After all, he is not so very boorish, is he?" asked Florence.

"No, indeed, I think he is delightful. Simple, without being stupid; good-natured and easy tempered, without being weak—straightforward, honest, honourable, and determined, of that I am sure."

"Really and truly, Jane, I never heard you use such

a string of laudatory epithets! Take care, or you will lose your heart to this Irish lord."

"I have no fear of that," said the young lady. "Surely I may like a man for his good qualities without falling in love with him."

"Of course you may. But then, on the other hand, there is the possibility that you may not."

"How ridiculous you are, Florence. What a time they are with the pony chaise. I do so long to see the little darlings."

It is to be observed that on this occasion, although she declared there was no danger of Scatterbrain stealing her heart, that she did not repudiate and scout the idea with such utter scorn as was the case on the previous night.

So soon as the pony-chaise was brought round, the two ladies took their seats, and, Florence driving, away they went down the drive, through the carriage-gates, and were soon rattling along the road at the rate of some nine miles an hour, for the ponies were indeed a pair of steppers.

"Oh, this is delightful!" cried Lady Jane. "I always used to despise pony-chaises, classing them with sea-side donkeys, basket-carriages, and that sort of thing. But I shall certainly make Colonel Vavasour buy me a pair and chaise, as much like these as possible."

"They certainly do trot beautifully," remarked Florence. "I wonder, when you say that you like a pony-chaise, if Lord Scatterbrain will promise to order one at Ballysmashem Castle, as he did with respect to the billiard-table," said Florence, laughing.

Thus laughing and chatting, the two young ladies were rattled swiftly over the hard road, and ere long came in sight of the horsemen who had preceded them.

CHAPTER XIV

A SPORTING BET.

BUT they did not overtake Scatterbrain and Fulford so easily as they anticipated, for though these latter never put their horses out of an easy trot they continued to keep ahead by taking to the fields whenever there was a chance of cutting off a corner or saving a few hundred yards.

It was not until they were within a couple of miles of the meet that Florence was able to come up with them, driving past at top speed in a sort of triumph, and then slackening for the two to join them.

One of the gentlemen rode on each side of the pony chaise—and the road being rather wide—either by choice or accident Scatterbrain found himself on the side of Lady Jane, while Jack Fulford found himself on the off, or driving-side, to his cost, for Florence had a fancy whenever he was not looking of touching up his horse with her whip—a proceeding, that once had the effect of making the animal start violently, and of nearly unseating him.

After this Florence was quiet—seeing that she might have caused her cousin a bad, perhaps, a dangerous fall.

“And now you young ladies had better think about turning the ponies’ heads the other way and going home,” said Fulford, pulling up his horse at a place where a narrow and muddy lane led from the road, “the meet is about a quarter of a mile from the end of this lane. If you venture down it with the pony-chaise you’ll get stuck in the mud almost to a certainty; and if such a thing should happen depend upon it we cannot stay to help you.”

Florence pulled up the ponies, and asked:—

“Supposing these gentlemen you have sent the dog-

cart for should arrive in your absence—Mr. Leroy and his friend?”

“*Eh bien!*” replied her cousin, “you must do your best to amuse them. We shall be home to dinner at half past six.”

“And Lord Scatterbrain, mind you bring home the fox’s brush,” cried Lady Jane.

“Ah! never fear, Lady Jane, I’ll bring it and lay it at your ladyship’s feet.”

“But I did not say bring it to me—you stupid man—I only said bring it home—to Captain Fulford’s.”

“But I will just do what I please with it—that is what I said.”

“Ah! but you have not even the brush yet,” pursued Lady Jane.

“But I will, never fear.”

“You are well mounted, I know, but you do not know the country. I should like to make you a bet.”

“I shall be glad.”

“What will you bet?”

Scatterbrain thought for a moment, and then his eye fell on Lady Jane’s fair hand, from which she had skinned the glove, resting on the splash board.

“I will wager you the best horse in my stable at Ballysmashem Castle against the little ring with the blue stone you wear on your left hand.

“Ah! but it is of small value.”

“No matter, that’s my affair.”

“Take his bet, Lady Jane,” cried Jack Fulford, “to my knowledge he has a splendid little thoroughbred at Ballysmashem that would carry you magnificently; fast as Eclipse, and quiet as a pet deer.”

“Done with you, Lord Scatterbrain,” cried Lady Jane, in great glee.

“Done,” he replied, and then Jack Fulford cried:—

“Hark! there goes the horn! We are more than half a mile away, if they find and we are not there we shall never see them again, for the fox is bound to go straight away.”

The ladies waved their hands, the gentlemen took off their caps and then away they went down the lane at a

hard canter, for it was evident now by the whooping and other sounds that the hounds were in the covert, and might find and go away at any moment.

"Well, Lady Jane," said Florence to her friend, as they drove towards home, "I think you have made a remarkably good bargain."

"But, of course, even if I win—which I am nearly sure to do—I shall not hold him to such an absurd bet, I only made it in fun."

"That does not matter, my dear Jane," replied Florence, "you will find in this case that you cannot do as you like; he will insist upon your accepting the horse, and will be sure to send it over to you."

"That will be awkward," she replied, as she thought of what a rage Captain Maitland would be in at a splendid horse being sent to her with "Lord Scatterbrain's compliments."

Lady Jane burst out laughing.

"What are you laughing at?" asked her friend.

"You know that Captain Maitland considers he has a sort of claim on me."

"Captain Maitland considers—and so do others—for he does not neglect to let it be pretty generally understood that you are his *fiancée*; and as for you 'silence gives consent,' you know, and certainly you don't contradict it."

"Why should I?"

"Certainly, there is no reason why you should if you are engaged to him, which I shall be very sorry to hear, for I consider you far too good for such a coxcomb as that."

"But I am not engaged to him, and what is more, as I feel at present, never intend to be."

"Then what is the meaning of his manner towards you? why does he let others understand that you are engaged to him?"

"Simply because he obtained my uncle's permission to win me if he could. He pestered me, and to get rid of him, and yet avoid any unpleasantness, I gave him the like permission—told him he was at liberty to try and win me; but at the same time cautioned him that I did not think he would succeed."

"And was he satisfied?"

"Oh, yes—at least, he appeared to be so. And since then he has taken up the curious *role* you have observed. It rather amuses me, for I have not the least intention of ever marrying the man."

"Oh, Jane!"

"I really do not see any 'oh, Jane' about it. I simply gave him liberty to try and win me, as I should to any other man of whom my uncle approved. I know he can never succeed, but that is his business, not mine."

"But he thinks he has succeeded—or will succeed."

"He certainly has not, and I don't believe he ever will. Moreover, if ever he does, all I have to say is, so much the worse for him."

And with this wind-up, Lady Jane laughed her merry silvery laugh, which set Florence laughing too.

"And now I will tell you what amused me in the first instance. I was thinking of Captain Maitland's face when he learned—which he probably would before me—that a horse had arrived for me as a present (for so he would consider it) from Lord Scatterbrain, metaphorically speaking, he would gnash his teeth and tear his hair—for, you must know, he has conceived an absurd jealousy of this Irish lord."

Florence said nothing, but thought, if Maitland had really been Lady Jane's accepted suitor, the jealousy of Lord Scatterbrain might not have been altogether so absurd. For the latter had saved her life, and Florence knew that, despite her friend's light demeanour, and careless, mocking manner, she had deep feelings, and especially was by nature the most grateful girl in the world.

CHAPTER XV

MASTER JACK AND MISS FLORENCE.

THE ladies arrived home about lunch time, and shortly afterwards Colonel Vavasour, who wished to get home on business matters, urged his niece to prepare to start with him.

But Lady Jane—wilful, spoiled girl as she was—made all sorts of excuses—tried to obtain delay—and finally declared that she was not well, that her head ached.

The colonel—as good an uncle and guardian as ever had charge of a wayward ward, rich, noble, and beautiful—knew what she was driving at, and proposed that she should remain the night with Florence, and under the charge of her aunt, Miss Shuttleworth, and that he should send over for her on the following day, when, he added, with a smile, he “hoped her head-ache would be better.”

Florence assented to this arrangement readily enough, all but the colonel sending over.

“Nothing of the kind, Colonel Vavasour,” she cried; “I shall drive Jane over myself in my new pony-chaise.”

“But they have been for a tolerable drive to-day, and to take them to-morrow to my place and back will be too much for the ponies, I think.”

“I quite agree with you, uncle,” said Lady Jane, gravely.

“Ah! for once,” said the colonel.

“Yes, it will be too much for them to come over to your place, to-morrow, and return; so Florence, and her ponies too, must claim your hospitality for the night. Ha! ha! ha! I have you now, uncle, and you, too, Miss Florence.”

“With all my heart,” said the colonel. “Miss Grey

may believe that I shall be happy and honoured at her presence under my roof."

"But——" Florence began.

"But me no buts. It shall be so. It is so. It is settled. I am queen here to-day. Now, uncle, you can go as soon as you like; we don't want you. I know you have some horrid lawyer or business people, whom I hate, coming to-day—and you are sure to ask them to stay dinner—so I am well out of it. Shall I ring and order the trap for you? Ta-ta; compliments to Captain Maitland."

And with that the light-hearted, mad-cap beauty vanished.

"Was there ever such a girl?" cried the colonel, in affected horror and dismay. "Upon my life, I don't know what I shall do with her."

"Don't you say a word against her, colonel," cried Florence; "she is the dearest darling of a girl in the world; and I do believe I love her better than any one in the world."

"What, Florence—better than your own relatives? better than your old aunt?" said Miss Shuttleworth, reproachfully.

"Well, you know, I did not exactly mean that. Of course I love you, aunt, dear."

"And don't you love your cousin, Captain Fulford, too?" asked the colonel, with sly humour. For he had an inkling that there was something more between Master Jack and Miss Florence than mere cousinly love.

Florence caught a suspicion of a smile on the colonel's face—a twinkle in her aunt's eye.

She could not help the tell-tale blood flying to her face, but she was ready with an answer.

"Love Captain Fulford, my cousin? Certainly not. I like him, of course. Am I not at law with him? Have I not brought a chancery suit against him, to turn him out of house and home?"

And with these words, she, too, made her escape.

"Bravo, Florence!" cried her aunt, after her, while the colonel laughed unrestrainedly.

And so it was settled.

Colonel Vavasour, thus unceremoniously dismissed by his imperious niece, drove off home; while Floreuce and Lady Jane spent the day together very pleasantly—as young ladies, really friends, and with no jealousies against each other, so well know how to do.

“Come, Florence,” said Lady Jane, as it began to grow dusk, “they will be home soon. I make you a wager!”

“About what?”

“Whether or no Scatterbrain brings home the brush.”

“Well, I will bet you he does,” replied Florence, “he will either be first in at the death, or break his neck in the attempt.”

“Oh! I hope he won’t do that.”

“Well, I will bet you that he does not bring home the brush—nor break his neck either.”

“Ah! That you know is rather an exaggerated expression. If, instead of ‘break his neck,’ you will say, ‘have a bad fall, lame his horse, or hurt himself,’ then I will bet you.”

“I accept the terms.”

“Now, what shall the wager be?”

“I will wager my portrait-album against yours,” replied Floreuce.

“Done! There is nothing I should like better,” said her friend.

And so another wager was made as to whether Scatterbrain would bring home the brush or not.

About half an hour afterwards the ladies were sitting at the drawing-room window, making the most of what little light there was—half from the fire—half from what remained of day, when Floreuce heard the horses’ hoof-falls.

The drawing-room window commanded a view of the carriage gateway, through which the fox-hunters would come.

It was not only however nearly dark, but misty; and they could not see anybody coming up the drive although they could hear them.

"They are a long time coming," said Lady Jane, impatiently.

"Ah, they have gone round to the stable."

And such, indeed, was the fact.

Jack Fulford and Scatterbrain returned from the hunt, rode in through the carriage gates, and after coming a little way up the drive turned round to the right, and made straight for the stable.

Had there been sufficient light, the ladies might have seen that Lord Scatterbrain had his left hand in the breast of his hunting coat, and also that he rode, bowed down over the pommel of the saddle.

"Perhaps we had better go round to the stable," suggested his lordship, "I shall have trouble to dismount, and the ladies may be frightened."

"Yes, you're right," replied his friend, laying hold of the other's rein, for Scatterbrain himself had scarcely power to do so.

Arrived at the stable, lanterns were quickly brought out, and then it was seen that his lordship was deadly pale, could not hold himself upright, and breathed with difficulty.

It was necessary to lift him off the horse. When once on the ground he was able to stand and walk, but in a bowed-down, stooping posture.

"Take my arm, dear boy," said Fulford.

And, thus assisted, the Irishman was able to walk along the gravel-path, and across the lawn, to the front door.

Lady Jane and Florence were on the steps to receive them; of course, in ignorance of any accident having occurred.

Seeing both walking, they had no reason to suspect anything wrong.

"Ah! Lord Scatterbrain, have you brought the brush home with you? Have I won the wager," cried Lady Jane, "or must I part with my torquoise ring?"

"No, I have not gained the brush, Lady Jane," replied Scatterbrain, speaking with difficulty, and in gasps.

"Ah! ha! another victory to me. I have won, then,

and your album is mine. I knew you could not do it, my lord. Our country is not like Ireland: no leaping to speak of, except bits of stone walls, about three feet high."

She was rattling on, when Florence laid her hand on her arm and stopped her.

She had perceived what her friend had failed to notice, that Scatterbrain walked, and spoke even, with difficulty, and was obviously in pain.

"Hush, Jane," she said: "pray be quiet. Something has happened. Are you hurt much, my lord?"

"Only a trifle," he replied, in a faint voice; "a little bit sore."

"Florence, send some of the men-servants at once. Lord Scatterbrain is seriously injured; he cannot walk upstairs; he must be carried. And send off James, instantly, for Doctor Renshaw. Tell him to ride full gallop—never mind the horse."

Lady Jane knew now, by Captain Fulford's tone and manner, that the Irish lord was really badly, if not dangerously hurt.

She said no more but withdrew in silence, conscious that she could be of no service.

But when Jack Fulford, after seeing his friend safely to his own room, came downstairs again to give some further orders—as to hot water, brandy, and other appliances—Lady Jane met him in the hall, which was now lighted up.

"Captain Fulford, tell me the truth, is Scatterbrain badly hurt?—I mean, is there any danger?"

"I fear so. It is certain that his shoulder is dislocated—and at least one rib broken. I fear the lungs are injured, too, for he coughs blood."

"Oh, great heavens! How did it happen?"

"It was all through that silly wager I, half in fun, urged you to accept. I wish my tongue had been cut out ere I had done so," he added, bitterly.

"Oh! my God! and it was to win the brush he rode so recklessly?"

"Recklessly! He rode like a madman."

Lady Jane waited to hear no more, but crept quietly

into the drawing-room, where, as yet there was no light.

Reclining on the sofa, she hid her face in the cushion, and wept tears of genuine sorrow and self-reproach.

CHAPTER XVI.

A RAILWAY FLIRTATION.

AND now, leaving Lord Scatterbrain—sore and crippled—to the care of nurses and doctor, we will change the scene and introduce to the reader some other characters—notably Mr. Lambton Leroy and his friend, Mr. John Graham, whom Jack Fulford expects to have shortly as his guests.

It is about ten minutes to eleven o'clock, when a dog-cart rattles up to a considerable station on the North Western line. This station is about eight miles from London, and between sixty and seventy from Woodford Grange and Lambton Buzzard.

A dog-cart, with silver-plated harness—groom in livery behind—a fine horse—and altogether a decidedly stylish turn-out, dashed up to the first-class entrance.

Two persons occupied the front seats, both well and fashionably dressed.

The younger of these, Mr. Lambton Leroy, is apparently about twenty-eight years of age—middle height and size—small moustache and whiskers—keen dark eyes, full of fire, fun, and mischief—and decidedly a handsome face.

There is a sort of nervous restlessness about his very manner—a desire to be always on the move, which well befits his character.

His companion has the reins, and almost before he can pull up the horse, Leroy has sprung to the ground.

“How about time? Porter, when does the train leave for Lambton Road Station?”

"Ten minutes good, sir, yet."

"Ah, that is first-rate—I hate being hurried. Ten minutes, I notice, when trains are due, generally means half-an-hour; so I'll light a cigar."

With these words he pulled out his cigar-case, and began fumbling in his pockets for fuzees.

But of these he could not find any, so was forced to apply to his companion.

"Have you any lights, Graham?"

"Not one—left my box on the mantel-piece."

Leroy, looking round, beheld an old gentleman walking slowly up and down outside the station, and accompanied by an extremely pretty young lady, probably his daughter or niece.

To him, then, Leroy addressed himself.

"Pardon me, sir; can you oblige me with a cigar-light?"

"Well, yes, sir, I have some lights; but I was under the impression that the bye-laws strictly forbade smoking, not only in the carriages, but even at the station."

"Ah! bah!" cried the young man, impatiently. "Why, then, do they not put on smoking-carriages?"

The old gentleman gave our friend a light, and did not seem disposed to continue the discussion.

But there was a pretty young lady in the case, and Leroy determined to have a few words with her, if possible.

And this he contrived in the most cool and easy manner possible, and yet with such politeness and good breeding, as to make it very difficult for either her or the old gentleman to repulse him, or refuse to enter into conversation.

Ere many minutes, he had ascertained their destination—strange to say, his own, Lambton Road Station.

The ice once broken, the young lady seemed by no means averse to a little talk with so distinguished-looking and handsome a young man, although her older relative, guardian, or whatever he might be, did not seem to be quite satisfied with the free-and-easy manner in which Leroy was ingratiating himself with the lady.

At last, and after only a short delay beyond the time,

the bell was heard announcing the approach of the down train.

There was quite a crowd in the ticket-office, and the window was quite blocked up.

The old gentleman was gouty, and quite incapable of making his way in a crowd.

"Susan, my dear," he said, "I must trouble you to take the tickets."

"Yes, uncle," she replied; and producing her purse, was about to enter the crowd, when Leroy stopped her.

"By no manner of means, young lady. Allow me to take tickets for you—single or return?"

"Oh! thanks, sir, you are too kind," murmured the brown-eyed damsels, blushing.

The young man made his way easily through the crowd, and took two single first-class tickets.

With these he made the best of his way back to Miss Susan, and gave them to her.

"Leroy, you have taken tickets, I suppose?" said his companion, coming up at the moment. "I saw you making for the window."

"Indeed I have, but neither for you nor me, but for this young lady."

"And why not for us?"

"For the best of all reasons—that I had no more money, or, at least, not enough—so, my friend, you must make haste and provide yourself with the necessary pieces of card-board, while I see this lady and her uncle to a comfortable carriage."

Mr. Robert Graham, his companion, hastened, after a slight gesture of annoyance and impatience, to do as requested.

"Oh, sir, I fear you have inconvenienced yourself for me," she cried.

"Not a bit of it, I assure you."

"How much were the tickets?" she asked, opening her purse.

"There, there, don't trouble about it now—wait till you are comfortably seated."

"But perhaps I may not see you—I may miss you," she urged.

'Not a bit of it; I will take care to find a carriage in which there is a seat for myself and friend.'

The lady could not help smiling at the quiet manner in which he announced his intention of travelling in the same carriage with herself and uncle.

The guard at this moment came up.

"There is a ladies' carriage if you wish to travel in one," he said. "Any ladies who wish to ride in a ladies' carriage?"

The guard seemed to address himself particularly to the fair Susan.

To him, then, Lambton Leroy replied with admirable assurance.

"No, certainly not; the ladies prefer the company of gentlemen to being nursed up in a carriage by themselves. Perhaps, however, there are gentlemen who would prefer to ride where there are no ladies; and your uncle, young lady, may be one," he added, lowering his voice so as not to be heard by any one except herself.

She shook her head, smiling, in spite of herself, at his cool self-possession and impudence.

He now proceeded to put the young lady into an empty carriage, where she was followed by the old gentleman, her uncle.

Then he rushed off to see the luggage of himself and friend duly placed in the van, and returning just as the train was about to start, secured a seat on the right hand of the young lady, in the corner of the window, she declaring that she preferred to be farther away.

His friend, whom he addressed as Graham, was opposite him. On his left was the young lady, and in the opposite corner her uncle—these four being the sole occupants of the carriage.

There was a silence of some few minutes after the train started, as is generally the case.

Then Lambton Leroy began to hum an air, in excellent time and tune.

The young lady leaned forward and listened attentively.

"Ah! that is from *l'Africaine*," she said. "I have

never heard the opera—only selections from it—but I recognize that.”

“Ah! you are a musician, then?” cried Leroy, joyfully. “I, too, am fond of music. Are you?”

“Passionately!” she replied; “but I cannot as yet call myself a musician, though I hope to do so, as it is to be my profession.”

“You have a voice?”

“Yes; and friends, perhaps over indulgent, tell me a very good one. I do hope I shall be able to sing well some day, notwithstanding this dreadful climate.”

“Ah, you should go to Italy. In fact, you must go to Italy.”

“I have been to Italy; I am going again for a few months.”

“And then you will burst forth on an enchanted world as a magnificent soprano. Is it not so, young lady! Ah! yes, I am sure your voice is a soprano—a lovely soprano!”

“I do not know so much about that,” she replied, smiling at his vehemence; “but I believe I have a soprano voice.”

“Can you read music at sight?”

“Oh, yes; I play at sight; and also, I have composed some little pieces,” replied the young girl, who, now that she spoke on a subject in which she was deeply interested, lost all her shyness and reserve.

For, by a sort of intuitive perception, she knew that she was speaking to one like herself, a lover of music.

“By Jove!” he thought, to himself, “this is a little gem I have made acquaintance with—pretty, charming, innocent, and talented.”

He now took every opportunity, while talking gaily, mainly on musical topics, to observe the young lady more closely.

He saw a sweet-faced, brown-haired, brown-eyed girl, of apparently eighteen or nineteen years of age.

Her face was not, perhaps, strictly beautiful, in an artistic sense, for the nose was too short; and there were other little peculiarities with which a stern critic might find fault. And yet, taken as a whole, it was

impossible for an impartial observer not to acknowledge the fascinating charm of face and expression combined.

A physiognomist would probably say that the young lady had a gentle, yielding, somewhat weak nature, and would be easily led by any one whom she trusted, loved, or even liked.

Soft and pliant, one of those meek and gentle dispositions, which, coupled with beauty, so often prove disastrous to their possessors.

"The sweetest face I have ever looked on in my life," said Leroy, to himself.

And at that moment she caught his eyes keenly regarding her.

She coloured up, and then laughing, turned her face away.

"Really, I am very rude," he said. "I do hope and trust I have not offended you."

"Not at all, sir," she replied, graciously; and at that moment the train entered a tunnel.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE LITTLE PRIMA DONNA.

"Do you know what I have been thinking of?" he asked, when they emerged from the tunnel, "while we have been thundering along in the dark?"

"I cannot form an idea," she replied, shaking her head.

"Well, I was thinking how dearly I should like to hear you sing. Is it not possible?"

"Do you live near Lambton Buzzard?" she asked, demurely.

"No, not exactly; but I have a little property in the neighbourhood, and shall be there for a week or more."

"Then come to chapel—the Holy Catholic Chapel, not your heretic church—and you will hear me."

"Ah! you sing there?"

"I have sung there, and, if I am well and able, I shall sing there again on next Sunday."

"Ah! yes; but that is sacred music, for which I do not greatly care."

"That is very wicked of you," she said, gravely.

"Well, then, to please you, I will like sacred music. But what I want is, to hear you sing some little ballad or air from an opera."

"But that is not possible," she replied, still smiling.

"Oh, dear yes, quite possible," he urged; "see, your uncle is fast asleep, and besides him there is no one in the carriage but myself, you, and my friend, and I need not say how delighted we shall be to hear you."

"What an absurd notion!" she cried, laughing.

"Not a bit of it."

"Really, I cannot."

"Ah! now, do oblige."

"But I shall wake my uncle."

"Nonsense; your sweet strains will be more likely to lull him to sleep. He will dream he is in Paradise, and listening to the music of lovely houris."

After a little more reluctance, the young lady allowed herself to be persuaded, and in low, sweet tones, warbled an air from *La Sonnambula*.

It was but a trifle, but the taste and execution with which she sang it, *sotto voce*, were quite charming.

Lambton Leroy was delighted, and expressed his admiration in no measured terms.

"I am afraid you must think me very bold and forward," the girl said.

"Not in the least bit, my dear young lady. I should have considered you very unkind had you refused. And see, I was right—your uncle has not awakened."

"Ah! I am glad of that—he is old and fatigued."

"Do you remain long at Lambton Buzzard?" asked Leroy.

"I think about a month; then I am going to London, and then I shall go to Italy again for a few months."

"And then?"

"Oh, then I shall return to England, I suppose."

"And then?"

"Really, you are very inquisitive," she said, smiling, and without any sign of displeasure.

"And then?" he still asked.

"Why, then I shall practise or study."

"And then—but I will answer the next question for you. Then you will obtain an engagement, and appear as *prima donna* at the Italian Opera. You will make a great success; you will be pronounced the most charming *prima donna* who has ever appeared. You will create quite a *furore*—all London will go mad about you—you will have splendid offers from Paris, Vienna, St. Petersburg—a thousand pounds a night will be your lowest price."

"And then?" she remarked, in turn, laughing.

"Ah, then," he replied, looking sad and solemn; "then, I fear, we shall lose you. You will marry some marquis, duke, or prince, and our meek and lovely *prima donna* will fly away from us."

"Really, sir," she said, "you draw quite an encouraging picture. Ah! if there were any probability of your prophecy coming true."

"Why should it not? You have youth, beauty, a charming voice——"

"Sir, sir, you must not flatter me so; you will make me vain."

"But it is not flattery," he urged; "only the sober truth. And with all these advantages, what is there to prevent you doing all I say?"

"Sir, I am poor, and have no influential or rich friends," she replied, quite naively, and without the least embarrassment.

"With such a voice, and such a charming appearance, it is your own fault if you remain poor."

She made no reply; and he, too, was silent, for this innocent remark on her part set him thinking.

Never had he fallen across so charming a little creature as this—so fresh, pretty, and innocent.

How could he help her, and at the same time improve on the casual acquaintance he had made with her?

"See her again, I must and will," he said, to himself;

‘somehow or other I must get an introduction to her. What an abominable country it is, with all the fuss and bother of etiquette, and such like formalities.’

The train was now close to Lambton Road Station.

“I must manage it somehow,” he said; “but how?” he pursued, to himself, “that is the question. Ah! I have it. Jack Fulford knows everyone about here. I shall meet him, certainly, and I will ask him to introduce me to some one who is acquainted with the Catholic Minister. And when I have got an introduction to the minister, I will get him to introduce me, in turn, to his charming singer. Behold! the problem is solved.”

The train now rattled into the station, the old gentleman woke up, and all four alighted.

Leroy was all attention, and by no means forgot the uncle. He saw to their luggage, and then, addressing the latter, said—

“I would advise you to have a fly, sir, the omnibus is inconveniently crowded, and it looks like rain.”

“Ah! yes, thank you; I am much obliged to you, sir.”

Leroy himself went and ordered a fly; and, as he handed the young lady into it, he said, with one of his most winning smiles, and in his most persuasive manner—

“Where shall I tell the man to drive to?”

She hesitated for a second or so, and then said, in a low tone—

“Rosebine Cottage, Rokeby Road.”

“Susan,” said her uncle, rather sharply, as the fly drove off, “you should never give your address to a stranger. Now that person, though he looks and behaves like a gentleman, may be a pickpocket, for all we know.”

“Oh! uncle. I am sure he is not that. I am certain he is a gentleman.”

“If he were a nobleman it would not matter. You should never give your address to a stranger.”

“I really did it quite without thinking, uncle,” she said.

This was a little bit of a fib on her part, for she had

hesitated for a moment or two before replying to Leroy's question.

"It seems to me, Leroy, that you are a little bit smitten in that quarter."

"You must own she is a charming little creature."

"She has a good voice," replied the other, quietly. "I shouldn't wonder if there was not money to be made out of her."

"Oh! there you go again—money—money—money! You dreadful men of business think of nothing else. I declare, you are abominable—all the whole brood of you, from Rothschild downwards."

"And yet you find us useful. But come, let us have a fly, and drive to the hotel. I ate little breakfast, and can manage some lunch."

CHAPTER XVIII.

MR. GRAHAM MAKES A MOVE.

LEROY and his friend, Graham, walked on together from the station to the Crown and Thistle, at Lambton Buzzard.

"Have my horses come down?" asked the former, of the landlord.

"Yes sir, and gone away again."

"Gone away again! The devil! Why, do you mean to say you haven't room in your stables?"

"Plenty of room, sir," replied the landlord; "but Mr. Fulford, of Woodford Grange, sent his groom for them, and a boy, with his dog-cart, is waiting for you now with a note."

"Just like Jack Fulford," laughed Leroy; "he means me to come over at once, Graham. What do you say? Shall we have a bit of lunch, and start?"

"Is Scatterbrain with him?" asked Graham.

"Wait till I read his note," replied Leroy, tearing it open, as the landlord placed it in his hands.

"Yes," he added, after reading it; "and he insists on our putting up at his place—will, in fact, take no denial—and, as he has already taken possession of our horses, I suppose we have no alternative, even if we felt inclined, to refuse, which I, for one, do not. What say you, Graham?"

"At your service, my friend," replied the latter.

"Very well, then," said Leroy. "So, landlord, let us have some lunch—some cold beef, or anything you have handy, and Mr. Fulford's dog-cart in an hour's time."

They went up together into a long, old-fashioned room, overlooking the market-place of the town.

"Well, now as to business," said Graham; "what about marking this timber?"

Seating himself, he took out his pocket-book, prepared to make memoranda.

"Well," said Leroy, "any day that will suit you will suit me; but I fancy it will be better to choose one on which there is no meet of the hounds in the neighbourhood."

"A week is the utmost I can spare," said Graham, writing a line in his pocket-book.

"And seven thousand pounds is the least I can do with. Make a memorandum of that also, Mr. Financier. Is that agreed on?"

"So far as I am concerned, yes. You fulfil your part of the bargain and you will not find me backward in mine."

Lambton Leroy laughed, and in a half-embarrassed, half-petulant manner, asked—

"Why on earth, Graham, do you make such a point of an introduction to this Irish lord?"

"To study character, my boy. 'The proper study of mankind is man,' and I am exceedingly curious to observe how this peer, brought up in a mud-cabin, carries his new-found honours."

"Well, you are a strange fish, Graham. Have it your own way. And, in the meantime, suppose you draw a small cheque in my favour, for, I own frankly, I have not too much ready money."

Graham produced a blank cheque from his pocket book, and handing it over to Leroy, said—

"Fill it up for any amount up to a thousand, and I'll sign."

"Upon my soul, Graham," laughed Leroy, "you are quite unique in the way of money-lenders."

"My dear sir," said Graham, sharply, almost angrily, "I have told you before I object to the expression. If you look at it in that light I withdraw my promise."

"I beg pardon," said Leroy, bowing, with a half-laugh, "financial agent."

"I hope my agency is satisfactory to Mr. Leroy?" replied Graham, quietly.

"Well, on my life and soul," replied the other, "I must say you're prompt enough. I don't know any other man in England who would advance me seven thousand pounds, at such short notice, on the security of unfelled timber."

"Timber *and* Lord Scatterbrain," said Graham, seriously.

"Oh! damn it all," cried Leroy, "you don't suppose I am going to ask Scatterbrain to join me in the security. A man whom I have never seen, and shall only know as a friend of Jack Fulford's?"

"I neither ask nor wish such a thing," replied Graham. "In the meantime, fill that cheque, and I'll sign."

Leroy did so for five hundred, and the money-lender—for, although he objected to the title, he was neither better nor worse—signed almost without looking at it.

"You can send it over to the London and County Bank," he said, as he returned it to the young man. "I have transferred a small amount of ten thousand pounds to the Lambton Buzzard branch."

And with these words, Mr. John Graham rang the bell.

"Hundreds and fifties will do, I suppose?" he added, as the waiter entered; and then, taking the cheque from Leroy, handed it to the attendant with the words.

"Bank of England notes for Mr. Leroy. Or, stay a moment," he said, suddenly, "I will go over myself—I

want to see the manager. Turkish Bonds are falling, I may have to telegraph to my broker to buy in ten or twelve thousand pounds' worth."

Lambton Leroy, left to himself, pacing up and down the big room, thus pondered—

"Am I doing right in introducing Graham as my friend to Jack Fulford and Lord Scatterbrain? He certainly is a most extraordinary man. Luxurious, liberal, cynical—almost misanthropical, I sometimes think. A curious mixture. Lord Byron, Mephistopheles, and Moses Aaron, the jew, all mingled in one. But he behaves like a gentleman—looks like a gentleman—talks like a gentleman—makes his bargains without haggling—has but one price, keeps his word, and pays promptly; and, moreover, has evidently heaps of money. So, on the whole, I cannot be wrong. I want seven thousand pounds. He offers it to me at five per cent., on the sole condition of my introducing him to Lord Scatterbrain."

But somehow Lambton Leroy, although thus reasoning, or, it might be said, thus justifying himself, was not quite easy in his mind as to the *role* he was about to play.

"Damn it all, what does he want to know Scatterbrain for? Is he serious in saying that it is to study character? As he remarks, 'the proper study of mankind *is* man,' and woman—and, by Jove!" he exclaimed, breaking off suddenly, "there is that little girl, Susan."

Away from his mind flew all thoughts of money, of financial agents, of Lord Scatterbrain, as he saw, passing the market-place, the pretty little vocalist, Susan.

She was coming from the town-hall, half-supporting her uncle on one side, he, with the other hand, leaning heavily on his stick.

It was market-day at Lambton Buzzard. There were pigs, sheep, and calves, bullocks, cows, and horses. Some in pens, littered down with straw; the horses fastened together with halters; the cattle loose, kept together by their drovers.

Now it happened that just as Leroy's railway ac-

quaintance, the fair Susan and her uncle, crossed the market-place, a drove of swine burst down the hurdles that bounded their pen, and rushed in tumultuous confusion down the square.

Pretty little Susan and her uncle were right in their track, and just as they were opposite the front windows of the Crown and Thistle, from which Leroy witnessed the scene, the old gentleman's stick was knocked up, and down he went, the porkies trampling over him. His niece nearly shared his fate, but managing to keep her feet, escaped with only a torn petticoat and splashed stockings.

The disaster to the old gentleman provoked not pity but mirth in the minds and faces of the by-standers, much to Susan's indignation, for she feared that her uncle was seriously hurt, and vainly endeavoured to lift him up.

Blushing with shame and anger at their ridiculous predicament, she heard, unexpectedly, close to her, in a not unknown voice, the words—

“Leroy to the rescue!”

And her acquaintance of the railway carriage hoisted the old gentleman to his feet.

“Come along, sir!” he cried; “you’re all over mud, and the wind pretty nearly knocked out of you. You must accept my hospitality. Come, my *prima donna* that is to be, you and your uncle must take shelter with me in the Crown and Thistle from these wild hogs of Lambton Buzzard.”

Susan, blushing, frightened, and yet glad of the assistance of Leroy, took her uncle's other arm, and between them they led him up the wide staircase into the large room of the inn.

This last was very glad of their assistance, and to find himself seated in an easy-chair before the fire, puffing and blowing from the effects of his fall.

“No bones broken, I hope?” said Leroy.

It was a minute or two before the old gentleman could reply, but Susan was profuse in her expressions of gratitude.

“My dear young lady, I wish, instead of a drove of

tame pigs, I had had the opportunity of rescuing you from a herd of wild elephants."

"Oh! sir," cried Susan, looking at him with something like dismay, "how cruel, my poor uncle would have been trampled to death."

"Never!" exclaimed Leroy, grandiloquently "Inspired, by your bright eyes, I, with my good sword—umbrella, I mean—would have saved you from all the wild elephants in Africa, with the bulls of Bashan at their back."

At this moment Graham re-entered the room with a bundle of crisp bank-notes in his hand. He stopped, surprised at seeing Susan and her uncle, quite unaware, of course, of the cause of their presence.

"Be gad!" he muttered, to himself; "Leroy is spooney on that girl. A very pretty little girl she is, too; and, with that magnificent voice, a twenty thousand pounder to any fellow who knows how to farm her. Too good for him. A charming little animal, and a first-rate speculation. Yes, too good for him, and good enough for me."

And so, having mentally satisfied himself on this point, Graham advanced and saluted the young lady.

CHAPTER XIX.

OPERATIC NEGOTIATIONS.

THE old gentleman, a good deal bruised and sore by his upset, soon, however, began to recover himself, and thanked Leroy for his assistance. The latter would not hear of his attempting to venture in the streets again as yet, insisting that at least he should remain where he was until the market was over.

As for the young lady, so soon as she was assured that her uncle was not seriously hurt, she was quite at her ease, and in response to Leroy's invitation and

request to make herself quite at home, did so as far as she was able.

She divested herself of bonnet and cloak, and our friend having discovered that there was a piano in the room, an old fashioned, almost worn out instrument it is true, but yet in tune, and much more melodious than many of the flash-looking modern ones, which advertising makers take care to inform you through newspaper columns and flaming placards, are to be obtained on the "three years' system."

Mr. John Graham, though appearing to be indifferent and quite careless at first, closely watched every movement of the young lady.

Now that she was divested of cloak and bonnet, her graceful, somewhat *petite* figure was shown to advantage.

A close-fitting black silk dress, with plain white cuffs and collar, became her admirably.

Of ornaments she wore none, except a necklet and small locket. There were no jewelled rings on her taper fingers. No pendants to her pretty ears. Her dark brown hair was neatly braided about the exquisitely shaped head, of purely classic mould.

John Graham took up a position on the hearth rug, and watched her keenly as a cat might a mouse.

Lambton Leroy was doing the amiable. Bending down to her as she sat at the piano, and speaking to her in low tones.

Old Mr. Knight had closed his eyes, seated comfortably in the arm-chair by the fireside, and seemed disposed to recruit himself and recover from the shock of his fall by tranquil repose if not sleep.

Mr. John Graham could not hear what passed between Susan Knight and his friend, but he watched the girl's face, and noted the quick blush, the pleasant smile, the playful shake of the head, and other little signs, sufficient to show that Leroy's company and conversation were not disagreeable to the young lady.

A dark shadow came over the face of Mr. John Graham, as he watched this little by-play between the two young people. Slowly and quietly he folded up the

bank notes he held in his hand, and still keeping his gaze rivetted on Susan, replaced them in his pocket-book.

"Not yet, Mr. Lambton Leroy. Not yet," he said to himself. "I may have need to make a slight addition to our bargain. That brown-eyed little turtle dove is not for you. Her voice is exquisite, her manner charming. She wants but good tuition, practice, and skilful management to make a fortune for the speculator who takes her in hand, and I should not be at all surprised if that were to be John Graham."

Meanwhile, the old gentleman had dropped off fast asleep, and Susy Knight, warming to her occupation, commenced to sing, at first in a very low voice. Then, presently looking furtively over her shoulder, and observing that she did not disturb her uncle, she seemed to yield to, or be borne away by the love of her art.

Her fingers rattled faster over, struck more sharply on the keys. Her voice, from a low toned warbling melody, swelled to its full compass, and as she finished a short *bravura* passage without a fault, every note clear as a silver bell, Mr. John Graham bent his head, and looking hard at the carpet, muttered.

"Perfect, absolutely perfect. She'll do even for me, and that is saying a great deal."

Mr. John Graham now joined them at the piano, and without the slightest trace either in features or manner which could betray his thoughts, entered into conversation.

He prevailed upon her to attempt one of Thalberg's difficult pianoforte arrangements.

"Signorita," he said, when she had finished, "your execution and style are admirable, and were I not afraid that you would accuse me of flattery I should say perfect."

"But why do you call me signorita?" she asked, turning her face towards him. "I am not an Italian."

"Why do I call you signorita, you ask. Because you will one day be the *primi donna* at the Italian opera, and of course will assume an Italian name."

"Indeed" she replied, earnestly, "I should do no-

thing of the sort. I have, I am sorry to say, but little right to the name I now bear, nevertheless, I should be sorry to exchange it for another. It would be an act of ingratitude and disrespect to one to whom I owe everything."

Her words perplexed and surprised Graham a good deal, but for the present he said nothing, resolving, however, to question her on the subject when a suitable opportunity offered, and he could do so without giving offence or seeming too inquisitive.

"At least then, young lady, you would have no objection to modify your name—Miss Susan Knight—a very pretty name, certainly, but one quite unfitted for the Italian opera. Ah! it would never do at all, I assure you."

"Modify my name! I really do not understand you," she said, looking wonderingly in his face.

"I will explain. Knight is a name to be easily modified, as I call it. That is to say, an equivalent can be found for it in the Italian tongue—in other words a translation. And you can have a choice, too. For the English Knight may be expressed by more than one Italian word. And if no one of these could be made to suit, we could take your name as pronounced—without the *k* night. Then we have the Italian *Notte* which, with a modification of your English Christian name of Susan, would read and sound very prettily indeed."

"Really," said Miss Susan, laughing, "you are very ingenious, sir, and I ought to be much obliged to you for taking so much trouble on my behalf."

"Oh, not at all," replied Mr. Graham. "But I have not done yet. I feel sure, that being a Roman Catholic, when you were baptized, you had a saint's name given to you."

"Yes; that of Saint Cecilia."

"Capital—charming—nothing could be more appropriate," cried Graham, "I have, then, a name for you at once, and I think its being French an advantage rather, for an Italian *prima donna* has become rather common, and people are tired of the eternal signorita and signora.

Now you shall judge, both of you, whether I have not hit upon a very pretty professional name."

"Well, what is it?" asked Leroy.

Mr. John Graham took out his pocket-book, and carefully wrote a line or two.

It was the caste of an opera, and began thus—

LA SONNAMBULA.

Amina . . . *Mdlle. Susanne Cecile.*

"There," he said, as he tore out the leaf and handed it to her, "what do you think of it?"

She laughed and blushed, and gave it to Leroy.

"Upon my word and honour, young lady," he said, "I think it very pretty indeed. *Susanne Cecile*—it flows so softly and smoothly off the tongue. Do you not like it yourself?"

"Oh, yes, it is very pretty and euphonious, I admit. But indeed there is no necessity to speculate or provide for a future position, which it is not probable I shall ever attain. Indeed, sir," she added, turning to John Graham, "you do me too much honour."

"Not at all, and as to what you say of improbability, I must differ with you entirely. With such a voice, such musical talent and taste, everything is possible, success is more than possible, more than probable, *certain*, even, if you so wish it. Pray keep that leaf out of my pocket-book in which I have inscribed what will be, I have no doubt, the professional name of a future *prima donna*."

Miss Susan Knight yielded with a good grace, and then, at Leroy's request, sang an English ballad—it scarcely need be said with great taste and effect.

And presently lunch was brought up, and the old gentleman awaking from his snooze declared that he was quite well enough to go home.

And so they took their leave, parting not as new acquaintances, but almost like old friends.

Such was and often is the effect of a simple accident.

"And now," said Leroy as he rose from the luncheon table, "we will have the dog-cart round, and drive over to Woodford Grange, where, doubtless, we shall find Jack Fulford and Lord Scatterbrain, for I have learned there is no meet of the hounds this morning. By the way what of that cheque you went to the bank to get cashed?"

"Oh, I forgot," replied Graham, "I found it necessary to telegraph to town, either through my own neglect or that of my broker the necessary funds have not yet been transferred to my account. And at these branch banks they are so confoundedly particular and timid."

"Very true. I have often had trouble with them myself," said Leroy. "However there is no red-hot hurry. Doubtless you will have put matters straight in a day or two."

"Oh, doubtless," replied Graham, as they descended the stairs together.

But inwardly he thought, "I am by no means sure of that, Mr. Lambton Leroy. I must first see you cured of the fancy you have taken for my little signorita. Such predilections are dangerous, likely to be catching, and it would not suit me at all for you and that soft hearted little dove to fall in love with each other."

They got into the dog-cart, and Leroy taking the reins rattled rapidly over the old fashioned bridge of Lambton Buzzard, on the road to Woodford Grange.

CHAPTER XX.

A MONEY-LENDER IN LOVE.

MR. John Graham was, during the greater part of the drive from Lambton Buzzard to Woodford Grange, silent and abstracted.

In his mind he was turning over this adventure, if so it may be called, with Susan Knight, and planning how it might best turn it to his own advantage.

He had excellent taste in musical matters, indeed was really qualified to pronounce an opinion, having an excellent ear and sound judgment.

He felt satisfied from what little he had heard, that Susan Knight had a voice of unexceptionally fine quality, both as to tone and compass, a voice which, with practice and tuition, would prove to be really a first-class one.

Now, Mr. John Graham prided himself on being a man of business and a man of the world, and in effect, was a bold, unscrupulous, and skilful speculator, determined to amass money as rapidly as possible.

Starting with a small capital, he was now comparatively a wealthy man, and without doubt could at very short notice realise to the tune of some twenty thousand pounds.

But this was, by no means, his idea of an adequate fortune. Like most men who have once tasted the sweets of amassing money, it would have been scarcely possible to assign a limit at which he would have been satisfied.

As to the means by which he had made and was still making money, perhaps the less said the better.

With the exception of one or two lucky hits in the way of speculation, his *modus operandi* might be summed up in the two words—skilful usury.

There was no man who understood better, and more fully realised the fact that the most exorbitant rate of interest was not profitable, when neither principal nor discount were paid.

And, fully alive to this fact, he was very cautious in his dealings, though on the surface he appeared to do business in the most off-hand and reckless manner.

Hitherto he had not flown at high game, being contented with lending money at high rates of interest to officers in the army, and civil servants, and men generally who had an annual income and position which they would endanger losing, did they not meet all obligations or make arrangements.

This was a very safe and profitable game, only it could not be carried on to any very large amount.

Graham had discovered by experience, and satisfied

himself by a method of calculation of his own, that about the fifth of a man's income was all it was safe to lend.

And so it was necessary to effect a large number of separate transactions, before he could realise a profit of even a hundred pounds.

Still, however, he made money, and, as before stated, beginning with a small capital, he had in the course of seven or eight years accumulated over twenty thousand pounds.

This was not all realised by money or money lending, for Mr. John Graham occasionally dabbled in the share market—but only when he had certain and private information.

Also he bet on horse races, occasionally to a pretty considerable figure.

But in this, as in all his other dealings, he left as little as possible to chance, backing not his fancy but his judgment, and seldom making a bet unless he had excellent private information.

For him, the favourite, especially in large fields of horses, had no attraction.

Some dark horse at an outside price usually ran for Mr. John Graham's money, and very frequently the event came off, and he landed a good round sum.

We have spoken of this person's mode of doing business in a general way up to the present time, as cautious, safe, and profitable—a sure if rather slow means of amassing money.

Of late, however, he has been growing more ambitious—desirous of making a higher flight, and yet by no means willing to risk a calamitous fall.

One or two little speculations in the theatrical line have proved successful, and he now feels inclined to make a further and bigger venture when he can see his way, but not before.

He knew right well that lessees and managers, without capital, are, as a rule, entirely in the hands of the speculator or money lender who advances the necessary funds.

These latter are generally in a perfectly safe position.

Should the venture prove profitable they would get a large share of the spoil.

Should it fail they seldom lost, for most likely they had stipulated that the first receipts should be devoted to satisfying their claims.

And the enterprise must be indeed a most egregious failure if these first takings are not sufficient to liquidate the debt.

These speculations on the part of John Graham had hitherto been on a small scale, but now he felt inclined for a heavier venture.

He had an idea of either taking on his own responsibility entirely, or by means of a third party, one of the opera houses.

After mature thought and calculation, he decided that, worked in a peculiar manner of his own devising, the speculation would not only pay but prove enormously profitable.

For weeks he had been turning the matter over in his mind, and now, as though fortune really meant to smile upon him, there turned up this charming young lady, Susan Knight, with her exquisite voice and musical taste.

At once he perceived he had come across a gem of the first water, and as rapidly determined that he himself should be the fortunate possessor.

Strange to say—for Mr. John Graham was by no means soft hearted or impressionable—there was mixed up in his mind with the desire of making a profitable speculation of her, another feeling, perhaps as powerful, perhaps even more so, he hardly knew himself as yet.

He was decidedly struck by the beauty, grace, and innocence of the girl, and felt a pang of jealous anger, as he beheld Lambton Leroy making such progress in her good graces.

It was this sentiment which caused him to replace the notes he was about to hand over to the young man, in his pocket-book.

It was this which made him so thoughtful, morose even, during the whole of the drive from Lambton Buzard to Woodford Grange.

"Happen what may," he said to himself, "Leroy must be kept off that girl. It is to be hoped he will see the necessity of it—if not, he must be taught and that plainly, too.

Mr. John Graham set his teeth, and there was a hard determined look on his face as he came to this resolve.

"One mile to Woodford Grange," remarked Leroy, observing a milestone by the road side, "six or seven minutes more will see us there."

"Leroy," said Graham, suddenly, "what is your opinion of that little girl Susan Knight, or Susanne Cecile, as I have christened her.

CHAPTER XXI.

FOR ONCE, MR. GRAHAM SPEAKS HIS MIND.

THIS simple question, thus suddenly put, somewhat staggered Leroy.

He coloured up as he felt conscious that the hard keen gaze of Graham was fixed on his face.

"Why on earth do you ask?" he said presently, "any one would think by your manner, that it was a matter of serious importance."

"And so it is to me," was the reply; "a matter of the greatest importance."

"The devil," exclaimed Leroy, "how is that; I don't see what it has to do with you?"

He spoke sharply, obviously irritated and annoyed.

Graham here replied quite calmly.

"My dear fellow I will explain to you, and, having done so, shall expect your assistance and co-operation."

"In what way," asked Leroy.

"I will explain presently, but however, I will tell you why I take a great interest in this young lady."

He paused as if to collect his thoughts, and Leroy said, impatiently—

"Go ahead, there's a good fellow, we shall be at Woodford Grange directly."

Graham apparently paid no heed to his companion's impatience, but presently commenced speaking slowly and with great deliberation—

"You must know, my friend, if you are not already aware of the fact, that I am a man always open to enter on what promises to be a profitable enterprise, so long as it is tolerably safe to speculate—in fact, if I can see my way clear."

"I know it."

"Very well. Now it seems to me, that of all enterprises a theatrical speculation on a large scale promises to be most lucrative. In proportion to the population, there are not half theatres or opera houses enough in London."

"Surely you would not go to the enormous expense of building another Opera House, like that of Covent Garden?"

"No, certainly not. But it is quite possible I might take that or the other house myself, or perhaps put some one else in; I finding the money, and, of course, taking the largest share of the profits, if there should be any."

"That I can quite understand," remarked Leroy, drily.

Graham took no notice of this, but continued—

"Well, I have long been of opinion, that the present system of arrangement of both our Opera Houses is essentially wrong."

"And you think you could do better?" asked Leroy.

"I feel sure of it. But for the success of my plan, several things are necessary; foremost amongst these are artistes genuine and fresh, not only to a London audience but to any audience—you understand."

"Perfectly, go on."

"Of course, almost the most important point in that respect is, the *prima donna*."

"There can be no doubt of that."

"She must be young, handsome, with pleasing manners and address; and of course she must have a good voice, fine and fresh. It is this last point on which I lay most

stress. So that she is young and interesting-looking, with a naturally neat and pure toned voice, I don't care so much about a finished or a florid style, which can only be attained by years of study."

"I am inclined to agree with you."

"Well, now this is the state of affairs. This day I believe I have come across the one thing needful for a great success, even should I not care to embark in so heavy an undertaking as leasing a large house like Covent Garden. I can see my way to make a good speculation out of the girl."

"You allude to Miss Susan Knight, I presume," said Fulford rather coldly, for he felt sore and annoyed at the tone and manner of Graham, he hardly knew why.

"Just so, that is it exactly. She fulfils all the conditions I have laid down."

"Young, pretty, elegant, innocent, with an excellent voice and good taste, in short, altogether charming. You agree with me, do you not?"

"Certainly"

"Very well, now the next question which arises is, how I can best make use of her. How I can best make her subserve my purpose."

"You seem to have no thought or care for the girl herself," said Leroy. "You really speak of her as though she were a dog, or a horse, or some other marketable commodity."

"And so she is a marketable commodity," replied John Graham quietly, "and I wish to become the purchaser, or rather, I should say perhaps the possessor, to remove her from the market, in fact, and use her to my own advantage."

"Upon my soul, Graham, you are the most cold-blooded and mercenary man I ever met in my life!"

"I find it necessary in business matters."

"You do not seem to take the slightest account of the girl's feelings or wishes. You do not seem to consider that her interests and welfare should be consulted as well as yours."

"The two must necessarily be identical. What can be more advantageous for her than to be brought out

with *éclat*—a grand flourish of trumpets in fact, as the new and hitherto unknown *prima donna*, with a marvellous voice? It is doubtful whether she could ever attain such a position by herself, or without some such man as myself. So I'll consider that as settled, so far; and if I don't see reasons to alter my opinion, I certainly mean to do as I have said."

"You forget one thing. Suppose the young lady should not consent to your proffered arrangement?"

"Bah! that is nonsense. She will consent—she must consent. She loves her art, and, moreover, I can see she is not without ambition. I have no fear on that score, if I have fair play."

"How do you mean, fair play?"

"I mean if no other influences are brought to bear on her."

"I scarcely understand what you are driving at?"

"I will speak plainly, then. You have made the acquaintance of the girl, have you not?"

"Undoubtedly."

"And having rendered the old gentleman some service, she naturally feels under some obligation to you—is grateful, in fact?"

"Possibly."

"Well, then—I have rendered you a service, or am about to do so; that is a fact, I think?"

"Granted."

"I wish you, in return, to do me a favour."

"What is it?"

"Very little. Simply not to turn that little girl's head by flattery, or even by polite attentions. I want you to leave her entirely to me. Do you understand?"

"Upon my soul, Graham, you are a cool fellow," replied Leroy, forcing a laugh. "You have the impudence of the devil. But here we are at Woodford Grange."

"Well, think over what I say," Mr. John Graham said, earnestly; "remember, one good turn deserves another."

At this moment the dog-cart drew up at the front door of Woodford Grange, where, on the steps, Jack Fulford and his cousin Florence were waiting to receive their expected guests.

CHAPTER XXII.

MR. LEROY MAKES A RESOLUTION.

OF course, as an old friend and invited guest, Fulford received Leroy with the utmost cordiality.

After Graham had been introduced by Leroy, they were shewn to their bed-rooms to unpack their port-manteaus, and make any change they might think necessary in their dress.

Leroy, who was still sore and annoyed at the purport of the conversation with Graham, which was brought to an abrupt termination by their arrival, was not quite at his ease.

He felt a little bit ashamed of himself, and had a vague sort of idea that he was not acting a magnanimous part, to say the least of it, in this bargain with Graham.

Notwithstanding the assertion of the other, that he only wished to make Scatterbrain's acquaintance from curiosity, Leroy could not help harbouring a faint suspicion that the financial agent had other and deeper designs.

From what he knew of Mr. John Graham, he did not think him the sort of man likely to waste time and trouble on a frivolous object, or, indeed, on anything where there was not the prospect of profit.

As to what were the real designs and motives of the astute commercial man, he could only form a guess.

To his mind it shaped itself faintly, thus—

“Graham knows that Scatterbrain is rich; that he has suddenly and unexpectedly come into wealth and title; possibly—probably, even—he thinks, moreover, that his lordship, raw, inexperienced, ignorant even,

will be totally unable to manage his own affairs. Such being the case, he would require the advice and assistance of a man of the world, and that aid and counsel Graham would doubtless gladly supply. But then arises the ticklish question,—Will such aid and advice be honest, straightforward, and advantageous to Lord Scatterbrain? As for John Graham, he is quite capable of taking care of his own interests; and there is not the least doubt that, under such circumstances, he would. Yet," Leroy mused, on pursuing his train of thought, "a man may do that and still render essential service to the other party."

Leroy generally finished up by dismissing the matter from his mind as much as possible.

This, however, was not always an easy thing to do; and, despite his efforts to convince himself to the contrary, he could not help feeling, though he would not put it in definite shape, even in his thoughts, that he had made a sort of bargain with Mr. John Graham, of which he certainly had no reason to be proud, and the exact nature of which he would not like to be generally known.

True, he had not fished for an invitation to Woodford Grange for himself, much less for Graham, for his present host had sent urgent word that he and his friend were to take up their quarters at his house.

Nevertheless, Leroy knew right well that he had brought Mr. Graham down with him to Lambton Buz-zard, not, in reality, on the timber business, which could have been done quite as well without him, but in the full expectation—almost the certainty—of falling in with Captain Fulford and his guest, Lord Scatterbrain, when, of course, he would introduce his friend, Mr. Graham, to both.

The long and short of the matter was this:—

Leroy wanted some money advanced to him at once, to meet certain urgent demands.

He knew no one who both could and would do so without minute enquiries and tedious delay.

Graham professed himself willing to do so; but he, in turn, wanted something—over and above the heavy

interest on the sum advanced—a favour—in fact, he wished to have an introduction to Lord Scatterbrain, at that time staying with an intimate friend of Leroy's.

And, although he did not, in so many words, insist upon this as a *sine qua non*, the other was pretty certain that, at the very least, he would have much more difficulty and delay in obtaining what he wanted should he refuse to comply with Graham's wishes.

And now this hard-dealing man of business—not satisfied, like Shylock, with his pound of flesh—appeared likely to insist on fresh conditions—to dictate to Lambton Leroy how he should behave in private matters; in fact, that he should not presume to cultivate the acquaintance struck up in so singular a manner between him and Miss Susan Knight.

To assert that he was in love would have been an absurdity; he himself, at the time, never thought of such a thing.

But to say that he was struck or pleased by the pretty beauty, talent, and innocence of the little lady, would have been strictly true; and so he deeply resented Graham's interference.

As he descended the staircase, an hour after their arrival, to join Fulford and the ladies, who were in the drawing-room waiting for the dinner-hour (it was now half-past five, and they dined at six), he said to himself—

“Graham is a sharp man, a hard man; and, when he can get any one into his clutches, under his thumb, I fancy a tyrannical man. But he shall not ride the high horse over me. Already I have yielded too much; I wish I had not brought him down here at all. As regards what he says about this girl, I shall do exactly as I please; and—yes, by jove!—if he cuts up at all rusty, and does not seem inclined to fulfil his promise about this money, I will—yes, I will—ask Jack Fulford to help me. I know he's rich; and, even if he hasn't got the ready, he will lend me his name, and that will answer my purpose quite as well.”

After forming this resolve, Lambton Leroy entered

the drawing-room, where he found only Fulford, his cousin, Miss Grey, and her aunt.

He was acquainted with both the ladies, so there was no formality of introduction; and, after shaking hands, he at once entered into conversation.

"You haven't heard of Scatterbrain's accident, I suppose?" asked Fulford.

"No, indeed," replied Leroy. "Nothing serious, I hope? I heard he was staying with you, and thought I should see him presently."

"No," said Fulford, "nothing very serious, I am glad to say, and you shall see him after dinner. Although not actually laid up in bed, he hasn't yet got farther than the big dressing-room, which adjoins both my bedroom and his."

"Ah, Mr. Leroy," remarked Florence, "it might have been terrible. I declare he looked more like a ghost than a live man, as he was assisted into the hall the other evening. If it had proved fatal I should never have forgiven myself."

"*Yourself?* Never have forgiven yourself?" exclaimed Leroy, in surprise. "Why you speak as if you had something to do with it."

"I and another silly girl, Jane Vavasour—I daresay you have heard of her."

"What, Lady Jane?" replied Leroy, bowing and smiling; "who, all the world says, has but one rival for the position of county beauty—yourself?"

"Now, Mr. Lambton Leroy, if you begin to flatter, I declare I won't talk to you at all," said Florence.

"Flatter!" pursued Leroy, nothing abashed; "is it flattery to call fire hot, ice cold, diamonds brilliant, and your eyes, Miss Grey——"

"Not another word, sir; I won't hear you," she interrupted, preventing the completion of the elegantly-turned sentence he had commenced.

She had in her hand a small vinaigrette, containing very strong smelling-salts, which she held beneath her nose.

As it happened, he was drawing in a breath at the moment, so that he got the full benefit of it.

This set him coughing instantly, and brought the water to his eyes; and when he recovered breath, he could only say, gaspingly, still undaunted—

“Oh! Miss Grey, you are cruel as you are beautiful.”

“Oh, you are incorrigible, utterly incorrigible,” she said. “I was going to ask you to take me down to dinner, now I will have nothing to do with you.”

“Yes,” said Fulford, laughing. “I am afraid there is no cure for King Lambton—

“So constant in love, and so valiant in war,
There ne’er was a gallant like young Lochinvar.”

This quotation from her cousin, involving the word love, brought a blush to the face of the fair Florence, and she was fain to retire from the encounter. It happened fortunately, too, that, at the moment, Mr. John Graham was ushered into the room by a footman, and the ceremony of introduction diverted the attention of Leroy from his audacious flattering, and covered her confusion, caused by her cousin’s inapt—or too apt—quotation, as the case might be.

CHAPTER XXIII.

PHEASANT OR NO PHEASANT.

THE party at dinner that evening only consisted of five, Scatterbrain’s being sent upstairs to him.

Florence Grey sat on the right hand of Fulford, on her right hand was Leroy, opposite to them Graham, and at the foot of the table Miss Clutterbuck.

After the second course, Florence Grey said in a low tone, with a sly smile, to Leroy—

“Lord Scatterbrain, about whom you were questioning me just now, is not dead.”

"Dead?" he asked, looking at her with the greatest surprise; "I thought you said he was in no danger?"

"No, he is certainly not in danger now. In fact, I am quite confident he is recovering very rapidly. Indeed I may almost say he is well."

Lambton Leroy was now completely beaten. He saw by her look and manner there was some hidden meaning in her words, the nature of which he could not discover.

"But only a short time ago, in the drawing-room, you spoke of him as 'poor fellow,' and thought he might be confined to his room for days, if not weeks. How then did you divine the fact of his sudden recovery?"

"Ah," she said, triumphantly, "you own you are beaten, then, Mr. Lambton Leroy?"

"Most fully and humbly," he replied, "and willingly bow my neck to such a yoke. Now tell me."

"I will," she responded. "He has had soup, fish, a cut off the haunch of mutton, and now has sent down for a second supply of pheasant."

"A most robust invalid, indeed," said Leroy, laughing. "I would not let him have it."

"I won't," said Florence, a sudden fancy seeming to seize her. "He shan't have any more—a great greedy fellow—until he comes down. I believe he is only shamming, to frighten me."

At this moment, Jack Fulford had just carved the leg and breast of a pheasant, and put it on a plate, which Scatterbrain's valet handed to him.

"There," said he, "tell your master I envy him his appetite."

"You may envy him his appetite," said Florence, who seemed in a merry, mischievous humour this evening, "but you need not envy him his second portion of pheasant."

"Why?" asked Fulford, himself quite as much puzzled by these words of Florence as was Leroy a few moments previously. "It is as fine and tender a young bird as I ever carved, and I was particular to cut well for Scatterbrain, he being an invalid."

Jack Fulford had not noticed what had been sent up

to his friend, but Leroy, who now understood the joke, uttered a hearty laugh in which Florence joined.

"What on earth is amusing you people?" asked the host, laying down his knife and fork, "pray let me laugh with you."

This time Scatterbrain's valet was obtaining a supply of vegetables and sauces, from the sideboard which was immediately behind Florence.

"Well, cousin Jack, you want to know why you need not envy Lord Scatterbrain his second portion of pheasant?"

"Yes—why? I never saw a better."

"Why?" replied Florence, keeping her countenance admirably, "for the best of all reasons—he shan't have it."

She seemed possessed by the demon of mischief and impudence this evening, and, turning sharply round, addressed Lord Scatterbrain's valet—

"Please to take that plate to Mr. Graham, with my compliments, and request him to be good enough to eat it, as I consider Lord Scatterbrain has had quite enough."

The man was utterly aghast, and looked at the master of the house in hopeless bewilderment.

Jack Fulford, however, now entered into the spirit of the scene, and was disposed to humour his pretty cousin.

"Did you not understand the lady?" he said, rather sharply, to the astonished valet.

The man now proceeded to do as he was bidden, and being an aristocratic sort of servant—one of the Jeames order—probably thought he had fallen among a lot of savages.

Everybody laughed, even the old lady, in a quiet sort of way, as the plate laden with pheasant, vegetables, and sauce was placed before Mr. John Graham, who alone did not seem to appreciate the joke. Of course, however, a lady being the author, he submitted with the best possible grace, and saying—

"I bow to your command, Miss Grey, and hope Lord Scatterbrain will forgive me," and actively proceeded to discuss the pheasant intended for the Irish peer.

"I don't believe Scatterbrain ever will," said Fulford, bending over to his cousin. "I never knew a fellow with a better appetite, or one with a finer appreciation of a young pheasant."

Florence smiled and nodded, then turning to the valet who stood waiting by her chair, respectfully, yet evidently completely shocked at this cavalier manner of treating his master, said—

"I want you to take this message to your master, word for word: 'Lady Jane Vavasour presents her compliments to Lord Scatterbrain, and begs to inform him that he has had quite enough pheasant for an invalid, and that he shall not be put upon full rations'—as you would express it, Jack—until he makes his appearance at the dinner table.' Now, you understand," she added, "word for word."

"Yes, my lady," said the man, who was completely in a fog, and thereupon departed on his errand.

Of course everybody laughed, even John Graham, or at least affected to do so.

"Miss Grey," said Leroy, still incorrigible in the way of compliments, "your beauty is only exceeded by your wit. If such a prescription from such a physician does not prove successful, the invalid will be a dead man in a week. He will be down to dinner to-morrow, I bet. If I had received such an order, had I been even in the seventh heaven, among all the loveliest houris, I would leave them all and be down like a shot."

"Now, Mr. Leroy, if you go on in that absurd manner I shall give another order, to test your obedience."

"It is obeyed before it is uttered," exclaimed Leroy.

"It will be uttered," she said, "if I hear one word more of flattery from you."

"And what will it be?" inquired Leroy, "if I am not too bold in inquiring my fate beforehand."

"Only this," said Florence, coolly and gravely, "to open the bay-windows, put your plate on that little chess table, take it out, and eat your dinner on the lawn. I observe it is just beginning to snow, but that to such a *preux chevalier* as Mr. Lambton Leroy could not possibly be a matter of the slightest annoyance."

Again the laugh was turned against Leroy, and Florence by this second triumph avenged the slight discomfiture she had suffered by her cousin's quotation from Sir Walter Scott.

Meanwhile Scatterbrain's valet had gone up to his master, and accurately delivered the message.

"Lady Jane Vavasour!" exclaimed Scatterbrain; "is she here?"

"Faith she is, your honour," said the valet.

"Dining here this evening?" asked Scatterbrain in still greater surprise.

"She is, my lord."

"You have seen her, and she gave you this message?"

"She did, your honour—my lord, I mean."

"Oh, to the divil wid it all, this is beyont me, I must see to it," said his lordship, laughing good-humouredly. "Darby, get me out my dress clothes."

"Ah, now, your honour—my lord I mane. Sure you would not be afther venthuring down-stairs, wid the broken neck of ye?"

"To the devil with you and your broken necks," said Lord Scatterbrain rising from the sofa, rather spryly for a wounded man. "It's only the collar-bone, and but for that and the left arm, I'd be as good a man as ever I was, this moment."

* * * * *

In less than half an hour after Miss Florence Grey had despatched her message to the invalid, the dining-room door opened. No one paid any attention, or even turned their heads, thinking it was one of the servants, until Florence happening to turn round uttered a little cry of astonishment, and all following the direction of her eyes, beheld, with his left arm in a sling, no other than Lord Scatterbrain himself.

CHAPTER XXIV.

PHELIM O'ROURKE.

SCATTERBRAIN'S valet, of whom we have hitherto said nothing, was a character in his way, a sort of man who would by no means realise a fashionable fop's idea of a gentleman's gentleman.

In stature he was over six feet, stalwart, well proportioned, with a cheerful good-humoured face and bright red hair, a lad, he had been first a horseboy, and afterwards whipper-in to a gentleman, keeping hounds in Limerick, but as he grew in age and size he became too heavy, for though an excellent horseman, and first class huntsman, it was but a difficult and expensive thing to mount a man of some fifteen stone, who was bound by his position to be always in the first flight. So Phelim O'Rourke was forced to give up the post of huntsman to the hounds, which was to him both an occupation and dear delight.

Next he became head groom to an English gentleman, who had estates in County Cavan, and who took such a fancy to him, for his shrewdness, willingness, and thorough honesty, that he made him his valet and travelling attendant at a very remunerative salary.

The gentleman in question broke his neck in the hunting field, and shortly afterwards, Scatterbrain, who had been for about a year in possession of the title, being in want of a man who would undertake the combined duties of valet and manager of his stable was recommended to engage him.

The upshot of this was that Phelim O'Rourke was engaged on the same terms as those paid by his late master, and Lord Scatterbrain never had cause to regret the bargain.

In some respects, his height and stalwart proportions

were inconvenient and caused remark, but again, occasions might have been, and did arise, when his strength, courage, and shrewdness, and devotion to his master were of the greatest service.

Phelim O' Rourke had taken a great liking to Lord Scatterbrain, and would have gone through fire and water to serve him, or, to speak in more matter-of-fact style, would have fought for him, if need were, against a regiment of soldiers or a division of police.

Of course he had not the same adroitness, cleverness, and delicacy in little matters, the tricks, cunning, and general knowledge of the town-bred fashionable valet, but he suited Scatterbrain admirably.

He knew nothing of hair dressing and curling, and not much of the use of various cosmetics, in which many vain and effeminate fops delight; but he could do all that was necessary—in Scatterbrain's opinion—brush and fold clothes, clean cords and boots, hunting and walking dress, to perfection, and in fact do every thing that Scatterbrain wanted in the way of dress and toilet.

Moreover, he could read, write, and keep accounts in a rough sort of way, and, having a great objection to seeing his master cheated, always managed to prevent it, to the great discomfiture of the man attempting the fraud.

Being good tempered, and not addicted to quarrelling, he got on admirably with other servants, and indeed with everybody.

Strong as a young horse, faithful as a mastiff, and in his master's service, stubborn and tenacious as a bulldog, Scatterbrain found him invaluable, and no money would have tempted him to part with his stalwart and formidable valet.

Such was the faithful retainer, who carried up to Lord Scatterbrain Miss Florence Grey's mischievous and audacious message.

It will be remembered that he assured his master that Lady Jane Vavasour was present, and had herself told him the very words to say.

He and his master had been but a very short time at

Woodford Grange, and Phelim O' Rourke, though he had frequently seen the two young ladies, and was aware that one was Lady Jane something, and the other was Miss Grey, he really did not know which was which, and so it happened that, believing the words of the latter, he assured his master that Lady Jane was herself present.

Scatterbrain, on entering the room, took a keen and rapid glance round, and at once saw that she was not there.

His first feeling was one of surprise, for he had never before known Phelim deceive him. His second one of annoyance; ultimately, in two seconds of time, he came to a very sensible resolve.

To take, what was evidently a joke played upon him by some one, in good part, and not show that he was in the least vexed or put out about the matter.

"I wish you a very good evening ladies and gentlemen all," he said, "I am told I am not to finish my dinner unless I come myself to the table, and faith, here I am."

Florence Grey coloured up, looked confused, and indeed felt a good deal ashamed, for she had by no means expected such a termination to her practical joke.

She feared, not altogether without reason, that Scatterbrain might retard his recovery by the exertion of dressing and leaving his room so early.

Jack Fulford, really concerned for his friend, rose from the table.

"My dear fellow," he said, "you really should not have done this, you should have taken no notice of such a message, it was only a silly joke of Florence's."

"Oh! Lord Scatterbrain," said that young lady, "I am so sorry—sincerely sorry I never thought for a moment you would take it seriously."

"Seriously," said his lordship with a good-humoured smile, "and who says I do? Faith, I'm only serious in one thing, and that is to eat my pheasant, for I've earned it."

Jack Fulford was by this time satisfied that his friend would suffer no real harm from coming down thus early,

and was delighted to find how good humouredly Scatterbrain took Florence's mischievous pleasantry.

"Indeed, my dear fellow," said the host; "I fear you will fare badly, and be unwarrantably disappointed as regards the pheasant, for, exercising the same imperial authority which forbade you, she has ordered another gentleman to eat the wing and breast I had cut for you, and I see that he has obeyed her commands. By the way, that reminds me, I must introduce you: Mr. Leroy, Mr. Graham, allow me to present you to my very esteemed friend, Lord Scatterbrain, of Ballymasheen Castle."

Fulford did not go through the full formality of introducing them one by one, but took the liberty of lumping them both up together, in a little social gathering like this.

Leroy and Graham of course both rose and bowed.

"I'm very happy to make the gentlemen's acquaintance, but upon my life, Fulford, I don't know which is which," said Scatterbrain.

Fulford pointed them out to him respectively, and as Scatterbrain took his seat at the table, to show how utterly unconcerned he was, he asked laughing --

"Which is the man who ate my pheasant?"

This question, so quaintly and abruptly put, set the whole table in a roar.

CHAPTER XXV

MR. GRAHAM TAKES STOCK OF LORD SCATTERBRAIN.

JOHN GRAHAM was by no means pleased at the somewhat ridiculous position into which Miss Florence Grey's mischievous vagaries had forced him.

However, he had far too much worldly wisdom to let any evidence of the fact be observed.

"I am afraid I must own to the crime, Lord Scatter-

brain," he said; "but plead, in extenuation, the overwhelming nature of the authority brought to bear upon me, for I received the order from one whom I am sure no man could disobey."

"Ah, well," said Scatterbrain, resignedly; "better luck next time. I accept my fate, and will just put up with cheese and celery."

After this amusing and somewhat boisterous episode, there occurred, as is generally the case, a sort of lull in the conversation, and Graham had time to observe more closely this Irish lord, whose acquaintance he was so desirous to make.

He was an acute and careful observer, and prided himself on being a judge of character from the face and manner.

He watched Scatterbrain cautiously and slyly when he was not speaking, listening intently to every word he uttered when he did join in the conversation.

The latter was a little bit shy in the presence of two strangers, who, he was certain, were acquainted with his previous history.

This, however, was rather advantageous than otherwise to the young lord, for it made him specially careful not to commit any solecism of social behaviour.

This evening he showed to special advantage. With his left arm in a sling, and a strip of plaister on his forehead, he presented an appearance almost picturesque, as Florence afterwards told him.

And on this occasion Scatterbrain was carefully dressed in plain evening suit, with no superabundance of gaudy jewellery, as might have been expected in a man suddenly raised from poverty and obscurity to rank and wealth.

Plain gold studs on his shirt-front, and a signet-ring on the little finger of his right hand, and a hair watch-guard with gold clasps, were absolutely the only ornaments he wore.

Altogether, he might have passed in any society, as to appearance at least, as a gentleman of excellent birth and breeding.

The ladies rose very soon after the removal of the

cloth, and then, the gentlemen drawing closer together to the head of the table, conversation became livelier and more unrestrained over their wine.

John Graham kept aloof and silent for some considerable time, still engaged in a keen but unobserved scrutiny of Scatterbrain.

The latter was by this time quite at his ease, and though the brogue was very obvious, it would have been impossible for any but a very quick, acute, observer, to tell that he was not an educated Irish gentleman—very Irish, certainly—but still bred as a gentleman, and not, as was the fact, in a mud-cabin.

“Confound the fellow,” mused Graham, looking at him in an apparently indolent manner, with half-closed eyes, but with a keen, cat-like gaze, “he is not at all the sort of man I expected. He must have been well taken in hand—had excellent tuition. I expected to have seen him scraping his plate clean, wiping up gravy with his bread, taking potatoes with macaroni, holding out his tumbler to the footman for champagne, and other such absurdities; but I did not notice him make even one mistake, and I watched him pretty sharply. It is quite certain he is no fool, or he never could have learned so much—not in the way of scholarship, that is comparatively easy—but of the laws and usages of good society—the thousand little trifles and elegancies which distinguish the gentleman from the snob. But perhaps, indeed, most likely, it is all the better, for it is my experience that very stupid, and utterly ignorant men, are generally the most obstinate and cautious to deal with. He has been polished up a little. Is not altogether a clumsy, rustic, cutlass; and perhaps knowing and vain of this, he may think his dull blade able to contend against the keen, bright rapiers of men of the world, men of business, men of brain, such as myself. Ah! ah! if he fall into that error, then is my task easy indeed.”

This latter thought seemed to put Mr. John Graham in excellent humour with himself and everybody else, for he drew up and joined, for the first time, in the conversation.

"By the way, Lord Scatterbrain," said Graham, "how did this unlucky accident of yours occur? Or, perhaps, seeing you about, and so nearly well, a couple of days afterwards, I ought, rather, to say lucky?"

"Oh, faith, it was just my own folly. Like a big ass, as I am, I rode a jaded horse, at a break-neck pace, at a big fence and brook, and down he came, a regular purler. I was pitched on to my left shoulder, and the fall just broke my collar-bone—serve me right if it had been my neck—and to make things better still, my horse, in scrambling up, gave me a tap in the ribs with his hind hoofs, and cracked a few of them.

"But I had always heard, Lord Scatterbrain," said Graham, with great tact and craft, "that you were not only a bold and skilful, but also a careful rider, as every man, who really understands horses and hounds, must be."

"Well, now," said Scatterbrain, with a half-laugh; "I didn't think I was such a fool myself, until the smash came, and it was all over."

"Come, Scatterbrain," said Fulford; "tell the whole truth of the matter—that Venus, Cupid, or some mythological personage, was the cause of your downfall."

"Ah! divil a bit of it. It was just my own folly," protested Scatterbrain.

"Yes; but I was speaking of the prime cause—which would thus impel a careful horseman to ride at break-neck speed, at big fences, with a tried animal. The fact is, sir," turning to John Graham, "Lord Scatterbrain made a wager with a lady that he would be first in at the death, and bring her the fox's brush as proof. In his mad audacity to lay this trophy at her feet he came to grief—nearly broke his neck, and lost his bet at the same time. Is it not a fact, Scatterbrain?"

"My dear boy," replied his lordship, laughing; "it's myself would be sorry to contradict you."

"Talking about bets, Fulford," remarked Leroy, "do you remember the last we had together?"

"Yes—it was never decided. It was on a game of

billiards, and for what reason I can't remember now ; it was not finished, and the bet remained undecided. I think you had the best of the game. We were playing 250 up, and you were a hundred and twenty something to my 93. However, if you like, we will play it off to-night, after we have taken coffee with the ladies?"

"With all my heart," replied Leroy.

"And your friend, Mr. Graham, can, if he likes, challenge Lord Scatterbrain at *écarté*," Fulford continued. "While we are disputing our game of billiards, you two gentlemen can try conclusions with the cards."

"With all my heart," said Scatterbrain; "if Mr. Graham will make some excuse for a cripple, in the way of shuffling, dealing, and so on?"

"Oh, certainly," replied Graham, whom this proposal suited exactly

"Now," he said, to himself, as they rose to join the ladies; "I will test the quality of his metal—discover whether he has the germ even of the gambler's passion in him—any trace of the *auri sacra fames*!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

FLORENCE SPEAKS OUT.

"WHAT is your opinion of Mr. Leroy's friend," asked Miss Clutterbuck of her niece, when the two ladies were alone together in the drawing room—

"Well, really, aunt, I have seen so little of him, that I can scarcely be expected to form an opinion."

"First impressions are, I believe, as a rule, generally correct, and everybody, on making the acquaintance of another, always forms some sort of a judgment of him or her."

"He seems a very quiet, gentlemanly sort of man."

"Yes, that is quite true. But, do you know, I am always suspicious of those quiet, observant, watchful people, who say little, but think a great deal."

"I believe Mr. Graham is a man of business, engaged in commercial pursuits," said Florence.

"Financial pursuits, I think would more nearly be right," replied the old lady, drily.

"Engaged in financial pursuits," remarked Florence—a little juggled, "that means some one who deals with finance, with shares and stocks, and all that sort of thing, which I don't understand, does it not?"

"Financial agent is often merely a polite and round-about way of saying, money lender."

"Goodness gracious," cried Florence, whose ideas of money-lenders, were not very distinct, "I thought they were all horrible Jews, with hook-noses, unshaven, curly hair, like the caricatures of Disraeli—and wore a profusion of jewellery. In short, odiously vulgar people, and I must say Mr. Graham is not like that."

"Ah my dear girl, many a young man has found to his cost, ere now, that the Christian money-lenders are the worst sharks of all—much worse than the malignant Jews, who, though they charge high interest, generally deal fairly, which is more than can be said of the professional brethren, who have been baptized and go to church."

"Aunt, you quite shock me. Do you really mean to say, that this Mr. Graham is of that class?"

"Oh, by no means, Florence, I only said that to my knowledge, the harmless-sounding words, financial agent, were often used to denote a money-lender of the worst class. I don't know at all that this Mr. Graham is one; I do know, however, that he is a speculator, deals in money, shares, stocks, and so on, and also that he does lend money, or at least, has done so."

"I do hope Mr. Lambton Leroy is not raising money through him," said Florence, anxiously; "I like Leroy, and always did. I should be very sorry to hear he was in difficulties. If he is aunt, could not *we* lend him some

money ourselves, and so prevent him from falling into bad hands?"

Her aunt laughed at this strange suggestion, as well she might.

"What, Florence, do you want to turn money-lender on your own account, tempted by the large profits to be made?"

"Oh, nonsense, aunt, I was not thinking of profits at all, you know quite well I meant to save him from falling into bad hands."

"Really, Florence," said her aunt, rather sharply, for as the reader knows, she had her own views respecting the bestowal of that young lady's hand, "you seem to take a wonderful interest in this Mr. Leroy. Have you any especial reason for so doing?"

And as she asked the question, the old lady eyed her more keenly.

Florence flushed, guessing her aunt's thoughts, and replied in some little confusion.

"What rubbish you do talk aunt, as if I could not like Mr. Leroy as an old friend of mine and Jack's, without having some 'special reason' as you call it."

"A sort of Platonic friendship, eh Florence?" said the old lady satirically.

Now, Florence was proud, high spirited, and quick tempered, and did not at all like this taunt, and moreover she was not one to submit to such an insinuation, even quietly coming from her aunt.

"If you choose to think so, and call it so, you may. I certainly have a friendship for Mr. Leroy. I do, and always did like him, and should not be in the least ashamed of telling him so. He is, I am sure, too honourable a gentleman to put any unfair construction on such an avowal, and as to the wonderful interest I seem to take in Mr. Leroy, I certainly would and will lend him money myself, my own money; rather than that he should fall into the hands of Mr. Graham or any other money-lender."

Florence Grey spoke quite excitedly, her beautiful cheek was flushed, her eyes flashed, as they only did when she was angry; her spirit was roused and her voice sounded clearer and louder than usual.

"Florence, Florence, do pray be careful," cried her aunt, now alarmed at the effect her words had produced, the gentlemen may come up from the dining room at any moment—just fancy if your words were heard."

"I don't care," replied Florence, quickly.

Her temper once ruffled, she was not easily soothed and there could be no doubt she thoroughly meant every word she said.

"Money-lender!" Urged her aunt, "pray remember that I never used any such expression as applied to Mr. Graham."

"You said you knew he dealt in money, lent money, and if that does not constitute a money-lender, I don't know what does."

"Yes, yes, of course," the old lady went on, anxious now to calm the tempest she had raised, "but it does not at all follow that there should be anything wrong or dishonourable in his dealings. The most highly respectable men in the commercial world are money-lenders—all bankers are money-lenders—Rothschilds, Barings—every one of them."

"I don't care; Mr. Leroy shall not fall into the hands of this Jew, Graham, if I can help it, and I can help it, unless he is too foolish and proud to accept my aid."

"Why, what will you do, Florence?"

"What will I do?" replied Florence, "why, call him on one side, and tell him that if he wants to borrow any money, I will lend it to him, and give him a note to my lawyers to make the necessary arrangements for any sum he requires."

The old lady was aghast, and now saw the mistake, which, in spite of her usual knowledge of her niece's character, she had committed.

But there was no opportunity for further remonstrance or argument, for at that moment the gentlemen, having left their wine, entered the drawing room, and Florence rang the bell sharply to order tea and coffee.

CHAPTER XXVII.

FLORENCE PROPOSES TO TURN MONEY-LENDER.

"WHY, Florence," said Jack Fulford, as he approached her, "you look quite flushed. I fancy you are sitting too near the fire."

This remark of her cousin's, only tended to deepen the colour of her face, for she knew it had the effect of drawing the attention of the other gentlemen to her.

Leroy, utterly ignorant that he had been the subject of an animated conversation between the young lady and her aunt, took a seat beside her, and she, probably to prove to the old lady that she was in earnest, and to assert her independence, welcomed him with the utmost cordiality.

Her cousin, though he would have laughed at the notion of jealousy on his part as utterly absurd, felt a little piqued and annoyed at the obvious favour with which she treated Leroy.

Of course he could not know the true reason for the marked, almost exaggerated consideration with which she received the conversation, and attentions of their new guest.

Leroy, as would have been the case with most men, was naturally flattered and pleased, at the obvious favour in which he was received by one of the handsomest girls in the county.

It was this feeling of pique or jealousy (call it what you will), on the part of Fulford, which caused him to propose an adjournment to the billiard room, before they had been half an hour with the ladies.

"What do you say, Leroy?" he asked, "shall we go up stairs and settle this unfinished game at billiards, of which we were speaking?"

"I am ready, and willing," he replied, rising.

"And able also, I hope, Mr. Leroy," put in Florence,

"to defeat my cousin, for I can assure you he wants taking down a little, he is most terribly conceited, and self-sufficient."

Florence said this quite good humouredly, having quite recovered from her fit of pettishness, and smiled pleasantly at her cousin; but Jack Fulford turned his head away, and addressing Leroy said, with marked emphasis.

"Come along, Leroy, you must not believe all, or nearly all my cousin says."

He then left the room, the other gentlemen following him, and all, with the exception of himself, taking a polite leave of the ladies.

Fulford's words, and more especially the manner in which they were spoken, were so unmistakeably rude, that Florence could not but feel deeply hurt, for, innocent of all intentional offence, never dreaming, that in showing her independence to her aunt, by encouraging Leroy, she was making Fulford jealous, his language and words seemed the more unkind and undeserved.

The moment they were alone together, forgetting all about the sharp words which had previously passed between them, she turned to Miss Clutterbuck with a woman's instinct, anxious for a woman's sympathy, and said—

"Oh! Aunt, did you notice how unkindly Jack spoke, how strangely he looked away from me—would not even meet my eye? What have I done that I should be treated thus?"

Now the old lady had her triumph.

"Oh! nothing, nothing," she said, "you can easily put him in good temper again."

Florence did not understand what she meant, and after looking in her face for a minute, exclaimed:—

"Put him in a good temper again. How? I do not understand you."

"'Tis simple enough. Surely, being your cousin, you ought at least to place him on equality with other friends."

"On an equality with other friends," repeated Florence, gazing in her face, with the utmost bewilderment.

She had forgotten all about the little passage of arms, between her aunt and herself, relating to Leroy and Graham.

A strange girl was Florence Grey. Warm hearted, and impetuous by nature, in manner she was usually quiet and subdued, and it was very seldom she allowed her temper to get the better of her, and when she did so, she forgot all about it in ten minutes, as was the case in the present instance.

"Yes, indeed, you should surely do as much for your own kin as you would for a stranger, no matter how great a friend," said Miss Clutterbuck.

"Do as much for my own kin, as I would for a stranger," again repeated Florence, "and you say I can easily put him in a good temper again? Aunt, I really cannot understand you. What shall I do? What can I do? Tell me."

The shade of a smile was perceptible on the old lady's face, as she said.

"Go to him, Florence. Offer to do for him that which you offered to do for Mr. Lambton Leroy; tell him you will lend him money to get him free from the grasp of Mr. John Graham."

Not all at once, but slowly, Florence began to understand, and when she did perceive the drift of her aunt's words, she went too far, and took it all seriously. Her eyes dilated. Leaning forward, she clasped her hands, and stood before her aunt in quite a theatrical *pose*.

"What?" she asked, "my cousin Jack in difficulties! In the hands of this man, who you say, is a money-lender. Ah! that is terrible, and my fault, my fault. Doubtless all through this miserable lawsuit. Oh! why was I ever persuaded to let those wretched lawyers do as they pleased. To-morrow I will write—will send them word. This night, this instant were it possible, I would put an end to this dispute, which doubtless has brought poor Jack into trouble."

The old lady again had overdone it. Florence, woman-like, had jumped at a conclusion, and all attempts to explain or calm her were futile, and crouching on the sofa, she sobbed bitterly.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

MR. GRAHAM AND LORD SCATTERBRAIN COME TO CLOSE
QUARTERS.

FULFORD'S fit of ill-temper and jealousy soon disappeared, when he and Leroy began to knock the balls about; and after making a break of twenty-two, he offered to back himself.

"Scatterbrain," he said, "will you bet against me?"

"Faith, I will," answered his lordship; "you're out of luck. I'll always bet against you."

"I'll back myself for a fiver."

"Done with you. Do your best, Mr. Leroy," continued the peer, "my money's on you."

"Don't be afraid, my lord," said Leroy, "I'll beat our friend."

While they were fighting their battle with ivory balls on the board of green cloth, Scatterbrain and Graham had seated themselves at a game of *écarté*.

Their game necessarily proceeded somewhat slowly from the difficulty the Irish peer found in shuffling and dealing; nevertheless, he won the first game.

"How goes the game?" asked Scatterbrain, as he turned up the king, and throwing down the cards as he scored a win.

"Oh, confound it, I have lost," said Fulford, laying down his cue.

"And I have won," said the other; "that is all the difference."

Fulford handed Scatterbrain five pounds, and Leroy ten. the amount which, with bets he had himself proposed, he had lost on the game.

Scatterbrain took the sum carelessly in his left hand.

"I'll see you another game," said Fulford; "and, if you'll give me ten, will bet you two to one?"

"Done," cried Leroy, "in fivers."

"Do we play the same again, my lord?" asked Graham.

"Oh, yes, or double, if you like?" replied Scatterbrain, carelessly.

"Very good. My deal, I think?"

Graham dealt and turned up the king; also, he got the trick.

"I'll try him once again," he said, to himself; "rather a daring shot."

This time Scatterbrain got the *vole*.

It was now Graham's deal once more.

"The king again!" he exclaimed, with the greatest *sang froid*.

Scatterbrain lifted his head sharply.

"Mr. Graham," he said, "you have singular luck."

"Yes," said Graham, calmly; "I don't think such a thing ever happened to me before."

The Irishman said no more.

Graham now made a *vole*, and, of course, won the game, as he did three more in succession, Scatterbrain all the time playing cautiously and deliberately.

"Mr. Graham," he said, when he had lost five games, "you have the devil's luck and your own too."

"Oh, luck must change," said Graham.

"I hope so," said the peer, "for here goes my last fiver, and I suppose you business men don't take cheques?"

"Well, my lord, I think I'd take yours," said Graham, with a smile, and what was meant to be a complimentary bow.

"How are you fellows getting on at the billiard-table?" Graham asked.

"Oh, I am still winning," said Leroy.

"And I, too," responded Graham.

"Yes; *arcades ambo*," cried Jack Fulford.

"Oh, don't talk Latin," exclaimed Scatterbrain, "you know I don't understand you."

Scatterbrain and Graham played on, and as the latter had prognosticated, the luck turned. Graham offered to double the stakes, the peer assented; and this time it was he who turned up the king at the critical point of the game.

Graham eyed him closely.

"Hang it!" he thought, "is it possible I can have met my match?" He looked sharply, although quite prepared to lose the game.

"Ha! ha!" cried Scatterbrain; "the luck's come round to my side now."

"It has, indeed," replied Graham. "That, and the mistake I made in the last hand, have proved too much for me."

"There's nothing like luck," said the Irishman. "The devil always takes care of his own. I am sure to beat you in the long run."

"I fear so," said the other; "nevertheless, I am willing to double the stakes again."

"Oh," said Scatterbrain, "bother counting. I'll play you for all the notes I have about me," and he threw them on the table.

Graham carefully took them up, counted, and replaced them, then covered them with an equal amount.

"Certainly," he said, "I never refuse a challenge."

The first deal Graham again turned the king.

Nevertheless, Scatterbrain held all the cards, and scored a *vole*.

This game occupied three more deals, in each of which Scatterbrain scored the point and won; but, strange to say, each time Graham held the king in hand, and, of course, marked it.

"Upon my word, Mr. Graham, you're very lucky with your kings," said Scatterbrain.

"But very unlucky with my cards," he replied, as he pushed the notes across the table to his opponent.

Scatterbrain counted the notes.

"Ten—twenty—fifty—seventy—ninety—one hundred and twenty. What say you? Will you cover the lot again?"

"No, your luck is too good," replied Graham, with well-affected caution. "The same amount again? Double or quits may be redemption, but, if not, must be utter ruin. So I must reluctantly decline to accept your offer.

'I fain would climb but that I fear to fall.'

"If your heart fail you do not climb at all," continued Scatterbrain, finishing the quotation.

Graham looked up in astonishment.

"The devil," he said, to himself. "This bumpkin Irishman has picked up more than I thought. The stone may prove a diamond in the rough, and capable of receiving a high polish. It may turn out that I have found a foeman worthy of my steel."

And at the same moment Scatterbrain was thinking—

"This fellow thinks he has got a fool to deal with, but he shall find out and acknowledge his mistake before I have done with him."

As Graham had predicted, Scatterbrain won again, and yet, wonderful to relate, again did Graham hold the king twice and turn it once.

Three more games they played, all of which the Irishman won.

"Now," said Graham, "I must ask your lordship if you will take my *cheque* or I. O. U.?"

"Whichever you please," said the peer. "The I. O. U. will do—no necessity for cheques between gentlemen. Come, though, I'll play you double or quits for the last?"

"Done," said Graham.

This time they were four all, when Scatterbrain dealt, turned the king, and won.

"Well, you card champions, how have you got on?" asked Fulford. "I have lost thirty pounds myself to Leroy."

"And I," said Graham, "upwards of four hundred to Lord Scatterbrain."

All the next day Graham was very quiet, and in the evening remained in the drawing-room, with the ladies, until about ten o'clock, then wished them good night, and went to bed.

"He seems to take it very easily, that friend of yours, Leroy," said Fulford. "He has lost over four hundred to Scatterbrain, and does not seem even to want his revenge."

But though Graham had retired to his room, it was not to rest, for he sat up for more than two hours, and when at last he laid his hand upon his pillow, these were the conclusions at which he had arrived—

"Leroy is obstinate, hot-tempered, and a fool—with him I can deal. He is but a little fish, easily fried—and I don't dread his interference with Lucy Knight in the least.

"As for this Irish lord, that is a different matter. He is a fish worth landing. It can be done, and will be done, by John Graham, of Mitre Court, Chancery Lane."

CHAPTER XXIX.

AN IMPORTANT COMMUNICATION.

It was not until the second morning after this, that Leroy found himself alone with his host.

"I have been wanting to speak to you for these two days, but until now have not had a chance, and did not wish to call you on one side purposely," said Leroy to Fulford one morning.

"Anything important?"

"No, not exactly important, but to tell you the truth, delicate; in fact, I hardly know how to set about telling you."

"Oh, bosh, don't be shy with me, an old friend. It's about a woman, I may safely conclude, after the style of the eastern king, who, whenever he heard of any crime or disaster in his dominions, simply asked, Who is she?"

"How the devil did you know it was about a woman?" asked Leroy.

"On the same principle as that of the eastern king. Women and wine are the root of all evil. Now then, let us get at the pith of what you have to say. In the first place, it must be something very private and secret. No one but yourself in this house knows the young lady, I suppose."

"That's just the devil of it," replied Leroy, "that's why I wanted to have a talk with you privately."

"Go ahead, my boy."

"Do you know any one of the name of Knight?"

"Knight, Knight," answered Fulford, "the name is familiar to me, and yet at this moment I cannot say to whom it appertains. Who are they, where do they live?"

"I will answer your last question first. They live at Lambton Buzzard; and as to what they are, I can only answer Roman Catholics, and that Susan Knight is the most charming little girl in the world."

"It begins to dawn upon me that I know the people of whom you speak. Where in Lambton Buzzard do they live?"

"Not exactly in Lambton Buzzard, but, as I understand, in the suburbs of the town, I think the place is called Myrtle Cottage."

"Oh! by the Lord Harry, this is a capital joke, why, they are tenants of mine!"

"You don't say so. How extraordinary, do you know that Graham and I made their acquaintance in the train, the other day?"

"Of course I don't know it; how should I, till you told me?"

"What do you know about them?"

"Very little indeed, the cottage stands on an outlying patch of land, of about thirty acres, belonging to me. There is no good road between it and my own land. It's not of any value, almost as much bother as it is worth, heavily encumbered with all sorts of tithes, rent-charges, and most of all, being within the parish boundaries of Lambton Buzzard, liable to all the local rates, so I have given directions to have it sold."

"Who has bought it?"

"I don't know, really, I put it in the hands of Foster, the lawyer, there, who does nearly all the land business. He told me a fortnight ago, that he had got me a purchaser, and was having the deeds prepared; but if you want to know any more, I can easily get you the fullest and most complete information."

"Indeed, I do want to know more."

"In vulgar parlance, King Lambton, as we used to call you at school, what is your little game?"

"Have you ever seen the girl?"

"Never. An old gentleman, rather surly than otherwise, with just a tinge of Irish on his tongue, has been over here twice, once something about the drainage, and the second time only a week ago, when he heard the property was sold, or about to be sold, to ask if I would not grant him, or let him a lease, or sell him the cottage alone."

"And what was your reply?"

"Oh! I referred him to Foster the lawyer, who told him that the idea was absurd, as indeed it was."

"Well, now, see here, Jack, you told me you could get me the fullest information about these people."

"So I can."

"And you will?"

"Of course I will!"

"When?"

"Now, within a quarter of an hour"

"How?"

"By driving you over in the dog-cart."

"First rate," cried Leroy, "but don't say a word to those other fellows."

"Oh! I can't leave Scatterbrain, at all events, without telling him I am going for a time. As to Graham, he is your friend, and you can use your own judgment."

"Yes, he is my friend, but for particular reasons, I don't want him to know I am going to Lambton Buz-zard to-day, and especially with you."

"Why especially with me?" asked Fulford.

"Because he knows all about it."

"All about what?"

"Why, where the girl lives—to whom the cottage belongs—everything."

"The devil he does. Then why did you not go to him at once?" asked Fulford.

"My dear fellow, I can't very well explain to you now, but there are reasons why I would not ask him, why I do not wish him to know, even that I am anxious about the matter."

"Ah! I think I begin to see. It is a case of jealousy. You are both sweet on the girl, and Graham thinks he has the prior claim."

"He has no claim whatever, not the slightest pretence, neither had I—but look here, Jack, we have been friends for a long time, and you know I would not do anything dishonourable."

"I would stake my own honour on that assertion," replied Fulford. "I don't think I can say more."

"Very well, then, drive me over to Lambton Buzzard, and there introduce me to those people."

"Certainly."

They were in the breakfast-room at the time, and Fulford was about to ring, when Leroy stopped him.

"Don't order the dog-cart round, as I guessed you were going to do, but let us walk down to the stable, and have it put to quietly, and be off before they know what has become of us."

"Oh! yes, with all my heart," said Fulford.

"Do you know, King Lambton, this affair of yours begins to amuse me. I feel quite interested."

In ten minutes they are seated in the dog-cart, and rattling along the road towards Lambton Buzzard.

"I say, Jack," said Leroy presently to his friend, "supposing the old gentleman should want to buy the cottage very much, I suppose it is not too late to make arrangements?"

"Arrangements? What sort of arrangements?"

"Why, to let him have it."

"Of course not, I have not signed the deeds yet. But that is not the question, it is an outlying patch, and I want to get rid of it."

"Will you sell it to me? can you, I mean, without breaking faith with anybody?"

"Certainly, I both can and will if you wish."

"All right, we will talk of that another time."

CHAPTER XXX.

ARRIVAL AT MYRTLE COTTAGE.

WHEN the dog-cart drove up to the garden-gate of Myrtle Cottage, there was not a boy in sight to hold the horse, so Jack Fulford said to his friend—

“Jump out, old fellow, and ring the bell. I see one on the gate-post.”

Leroy got down and pulled the bell-handle, but as there happened to be no wire attached, this did not do much good.

“Go on, old fellow, the gate’s open,” said Fulford; “and knock at the door, there must be some one at home.”

Leroy entered the little garden, and had arrived as far as the trellis-worked portico, all covered with ivy and winter-creepers now (in summer time, roses, wild-briar, and honeysuckle almost concealed the entrance to the cottage from sight), when the sound of a piano, accompanied almost immediately by that of a voice, the clear, sweet tones of which he at once recognised.

He stopped, listened, and held up his hand to Fulford to do likewise.

For fully five minutes the song continued. Fulford sitting motionless in the dog-cart, listening with rapt attention, and Leroy doing the same in the porch.

Before the young lady had concluded, Fulford had espied and called to him a boy to hold the horse’s head.

He then dismounted, and walking quietly up the gravel-path, joined Leroy.

They stood together, listening to the sweet melody, coming from a half-open window (it was a warm, dull day—of the sort known as muggy), until it ceased.

Leroy had just raised his hand, and was on the point of knocking at the door, when it opened, and the fair musician herself made her appearance.

She started, and gave a little scream of dismay and surprise, at seeing two gentlemen standing almost on the threshold.

But almost immediately afterwards recognising Leroy, she came forward smiling, and offered her hand.

"I hope I have the pleasure of seeing the signorita—I beg pardon, Mademoiselle Susanne Cecile—quite well."

"Oh! yes thank you, but don't call me Susanne Cecile, pray."

"Why not? I thought it was to be the name under which you was to make your *debüt* as prima donna."

"Oh, don't talk nonsense, pray. But will you not come in—you and your friend?"

"I beg ten thousand pardons, I am sure, I ought to have introduced him. Captain Fulford, allow me to introduce you to Miss Susan Knight—a young lady of taste and talent—whom, I am sure, you will like and admire."

"Captain Fulford!" she cried, "what, of Woodford Grange?"

"The same, at your service."

"You are then owner of this little cottage, and are going to sell it and turn us out. Ah! you are a very cruel man, and people say you are rich too."

Jack Fulford's heart smote him, and he really felt like a criminal under her reproachful glance.

"Indeed, young lady, I never thought of turning you out, never dreamed of such a thing. All I proposed doing was to transfer the property to any one to whom it might be more convenient than me."

"Yes, you have sold or are about to sell it to a man who is going to pull down our poor little cottage, and build up a row of ugly red-brick houses."

"Oh! I think we can arrange to prevent that business," Leroy said, "it is not too late, and I will answer for it that Captain Fulford will change his mind about the sale, at least as to who is to be the purchaser."

"Oh! certainly," said Fulford, who, in this first interview, was quite as much struck by the beauty and exquisite voice of the fair Susan as Leroy was when he

first made her acquaintance, "make your mind easy on that point; I will so arrange that you shall not have to leave, since you like the cottage so much."

"Oh, thank you—thank you Captain Fulford, I am so glad I have seen you, and uncle too will be greatly pleased. He is out now, I wish he would come in."

She had barely finished when the door opened and the old gentleman, her uncle, entered.

Without the slightest embarrassment, Susy rose from the piano, and smiling on Fulford, bowing slightly to her uncle, said—

"Our landlord."

The old man stood on his dignity at once.

"Oh!" he said in a harsh voice, "Captain Fulford."

"Yes."

"Come to tell us we must leave. We are ready at two days' notice; and for the quarter's rent—have you a receipt-stamp in your pocket, Captain Fulford?"

Leroy rather enjoyed this, observing that Fulford did not know what to say or do.

Susy Knight, however, came to the rescue.

"Oh surely, uncle, not that. You are quite mistaken. Captain Fulford and Mr. Leroy have come here with very different intentions. We are not to go. The cottage is not to be sold. Have I not your word for it, sir?" she said, turning her brown eyes full on Fulford's face.

"My word, yes—which is always followed by the deed. Mr. Knight, if you will come with me into the town I will at once give instructions to my lawyer."

The old gentleman was quite taken aback. Tired and feeble he was disinclined for exertion.

"To tell you the truth, sir," he said, "Susan generally manages business matters for me."

"Then," said Fulford, with happy inspiration, "Susy shall come with me to the lawyer's, and my friend Leroy shall keep you company in my absence."

Leroy looked blank, but could say nothing.

And so, with that cool impudence, for which Jack Fulford was so celebrated, he led Susy down the gravel path, handed her into the dog-cart, and drove away, leaving Leroy alone with her uncle.

CHAPTER XXXI.

FULFORD TAKES MISS KNIGHT FOR A DRIVE.

OLD Mr. Knight himself looked surprised, and indeed was almost uneasy at the off-hand manner in which Fulford had carried off his niece.

"Do you think he will be long?" he asked.

"No fear of that," replied Leroy, laughing—having got over his momentary annoyance—"Jack Fulford is very rough and ready—hates business in general, and lawyers in particular; should like to make a wager that he is not at the office ten minutes, does not speak ten sentences, and is back here in less than half an hour."

"Sharp work indeed," replied the old gentleman, reassured—will you take a glass of wine Mr. — I must apologise for forgetting your name?"

"Leroy—Lambton Leroy, at your service—Lambton Leroy, as they call this place Lambton Buzzard.

"Yes; my family, by my mother's side, once owned nearly all the property down here, and in the olden days, I don't know how many generations ago, it got to be called Lambton, after my maternal ancestors."

"You have still property about here I suppose," asked the old gentleman, helping himself to wine.

"Oh! yes," replied Leroy, laughing and colouring a little. "But not much I am sorry to say, a mere trifle in comparison with that which used to call the Lambtons of Lambton Buzzard masters. Indeed, I was coming down here on business connected with this when I first saw you and your charming niece in the train."

"Ah!" said the old man, "and a good little thing she is—a little flighty, perhaps, too easily led, but as pure and kindhearted a little girl as ever lived."

Leroy saw that the old gentleman was inclined to be

communicative, so filled his own and his host's glass determined to learn all he could about the little *prima donna*.

Careful not to be too obtrusive he contrived to keep the conversation on that subject, and presently Mr. Knight said :—

“Ah! her's was a strange history, quite romantic, in fact. I don't often mention it because I have an objection to make common talk of what is rather a delicate subject. But I don't mind telling you, knowing you are a gentleman.”

“I shall be most happy to hear,” replied Leroy; “it will serve to pass the time away most pleasantly until the return of the young lady herself and my friend.”

“Well, to begin with, you must know that she is only my niece by adoption, and not by blood, or even by marriage relationship.”

“Oh, indeed,” said Leroy, just to fill up a pause, and give the elderly narrator time to collect his thoughts, for, in fact, the latter was slightly asthmatic and got on with difficulty

“Some twenty years ago, I and my brother Ambrose Knight lived in South Lancashire, where I had a small property in freehold houses, which, with personal attention, brought me in a sufficient income to live comfortably upon, without following any trade or profession. So instead of wearing out mind and body in perhaps a vain struggle to amass wealth, I resolved to content myself with the small, but for my wants, sufficient competence my property produced me.”

“And a very good judge too,” remarked Fulford with a laugh, filling his glass.

“I was a widower and childless, and had no intention of again entering the marriage state.”

“I was then forty three years of age, my only brother three years younger. We are, as you are aware, probably, catholics.”

“Yes,” replied Leroy. “I understand as much from Miss Knight.”

“My brother Ambrose was at the time a priest. He had taken **holy** orders from choice, and a strong religious

conviction that ours was the true church. A more truly pious, and charitable man I am sure never lived.

"The scene of his duties and labours, was in my immediate neighbourhood, and scarce an evening passed, but Ambrose looked in and joined me in a pipe and glass of whisky toddy, for he was a man who was charitable, and did his duty to all men—himself included."

"He observed the fasts of the Church strictly, but on all other occasions was merry and cheerful, lived well, and thanked God for it."

"A most sensible man," said Leroy laughing, "if all your priests and ecclesiastical authorities were of his sort, you would get a great many converts from our Church, I am sure."

"That's just my opinion," responded the other, cordially, "and I am very glad to find a sensible gentleman like yourself agree with me."

Leroy smiled, bowed, and passed the wine, and saw that he had now quite gained the old gentleman's confidence.

"Well, sir," continued the latter, "my brother was offered a cure of souls in a parish in Ireland."

"He accepted it. In the first place, because he considered it his duty to his superiors and the poor people of the parish, and also because he thought it a duty to himself, for in so doing he would more than double the income he was previously enjoying."

"He went, and I was for a time deprived of his pleasant, genial company."

"I missed him greatly."

"A lonely, childless widower with few friends, felt his loss sadly, and as he could not consistently with his duty to others (and himself also) come over to me, I made up my mind, and what do you think I did?"

"Really sir," said Leroy quite gravely and with admirable tact, for he knew quite well what was coming, "I cannot form an idea."

"Why, I went over to him—ha! ha! ha! that was the way to solve the difficulty," laughed the old gentleman.

Leroy joined in his laugh and again passed the wine.

"Yes sir," the old gentleman went on, "I sold my little property to advantage, mind you, for like my brother Ambrose I believe in a man doing his duty to himself. Put the ready money in my pocket, and went over to Ireland, and in the immediate neighbourhood of my brother's parish, I bought some small farms and cottage property. I knew I should have no trouble in getting my rents, for there was little fear of my tenants shooting the brother of their priest."

"Ambrose was a man who always did his duty to everybody, and of course to his own family, and I have no doubt he explained to his parishioners that purgatory was a great deal too good for any tenant of mine, who didn't do his duty to his landlord."

Lucy Knight's uncle chuckled, evidently enjoying his own humour, and as a matter of course, Leroy again laughed with him.

"Come sir," said the latter, "the bottle stands with you. Your story interests and amuses me immensely."

Just at this moment Leroy heard the sound of wheels, and looking out of the window saw the dog-cart, in which were Susy and Jack Fulford drawn up to the gate.

"Oh, confound it," he said, "this will spoil all. I want to hear this story in full, and of course the old boy won't go on detailing his pretty niece's romantic history in the young lady's presence."

A happy thought struck him.

He could see through the window down the narrow garden path, although the other could not.

"Excuse me a moment," said Leroy. "I see a friend of mine at the gate, I just wish to speak two words to him, I will be back in half a minute."

"Oh, pray don't mention it," said the old gentleman, and Leroy was off like a shot, and reached the dog-cart just as Lucy was alighting.

"Excuse me, Miss Knight, don't get down."

"A little bit astonished as also was Jack Fulford, she took her seat again.

"I am having a quiet talk with your uncle on some

business matters, to hear the discussion of which, would only worry you. I know my friend Fulford's gallantry, I am sure he will take you for a short drive."

"Oh yes. I need hardly say how proud I should be," exclaimed Jack Fulford, a good deal puzzled to know what was Leroy's meaning.

"Oh," said Susy, pleased and yet doubtful, "do you think my uncle would mind?"

"No, I am sure he will not. I will guarantee that—By the way Miss Knight, have you settled your business with the lawyers satisfactorily?"

"Captain Fulford has behaved in the most handsome, most liberal manner, too liberal, indeed, I fear."

"That will do," said Leroy. Away you go—you two. A pleasant drive."

Fulford drove off slowly—pondering.

"What on earth is that fellow up to?" he thought, "King Lambton we used to call him at Eton. Whatever it is he has carried it off in his old kingly fashion, but I'll steal a march on him. Yes, by Jove I will," and then he laughed not loudly, but sufficiently for his companion to notice it.

"What are you laughing at Captain Fulford?" she asked.

"My thoughts; not evil ones I can assure you."

And with that he whipped up the horse, and away they rattled down the smooth, hard, macadamized road.

CHAPTER XXXII.

SUSIE KNIGHT.—A REAL LIFE ROMANCE.

"AND now for the romance of the business, and yet no romance, but plain matter of fact," pursued the old gentleman, when Leroy had again taken his seat.

"I am all attention, sir," said Leroy, filling his glass and his host's also.

"Well, over in the Irish village," said the latter, "time passed pleasantly enough. My brother was loved and revered by his parishioners, and I, though a landlord, not being a hard one, was respected, I may even say, liked.

"Ambrose lived alone in a little cottage just on the outskirts of the village. The old woman who acted as his housekeeper came early in the morning and went away at nine at night, leaving the worthy priest sole tenant of his abode.

"I lived in a small house of my own, by the side of the road, about three-quarters of a mile from my brother's cottage.

"One Friday night—I remember the day of the week well, by reason of its being fast day, which my brother, being a conscientious priest, of course scrupulously observed, and neither visited nor expected visitors, even myself.

"The servant girl and the boy I had both sent to bed; for being a landed proprietor, though only on a small scale, I thought it incumbent on my dignity to keep a horse and car, which, of course, involved the necessity of keeping somebody to look after them.

"Well, I was sitting up by the fire, smoking my last pipe and drinking my last glass of whiskey toddy, and thinking of going to bed, when, to my great surprise, there came a rap at the window, where I beheld my brother, looking pale, and scared, I might almost say.

"‘Why, Ambrose,’ I said, ‘what on earth is the matter? and what have you got in that basket? Fish?’

"He carried in his hand a rush basket, about a foot and a half long, such as fishmongers send home salmon in to their customers.

"‘Fish! No! Nor fowl; I wish it were either.’

"‘Come in, come in,’ I said, rather alarmed at his strange manner, a sort of suspicion dawning on me that his mind was disordered.

"He came in and deposited the basket on the hearth-rug with the greatest care, and letting himself sink into

my large arm-chair with a deep sigh, groan, I might almost say—

“‘Holy Saints!’ he murmured, dolefully; ‘to think such a thing should happen to a man of hitherto unblemished character!’

“‘But what is in that basket?’ I asked again, feeling sure that therein lay the key to his mysterious behaviour. ‘Not fish? not fowl? what then?’

“‘Human flesh,’ he said, lugubriously.

“‘Good heavens!’ I cried, now really alarmed, for I could only think he was the victim of a sudden attack of insanity.

“‘Why brother Ambrose, you have not turned body-snatcher’!

“‘No, no! I said human flesh, live human flesh!’

“Now I was stupid enough not to see what he was driving at.

“‘Yes, living, breathing.’ He went on, ‘a baby!’

“He threw himself back in the arm-chair, and with a look of abject despair groaned forth—‘a baby!’

“It was a great relief to my mind when I knew the cause of his extraordinary language and behaviour. As I looked at him leaning back in my chair, his eyes closed, the expression of his face the study for a painter as an ideal of helpless, dolorous woe, and glancing from him to the basket on the hearthrug—the cause of all—I could not help bursting into a loud fit of laughter.”

“I should think not,” said Leroy, himself laughing heartily, in which the narrator joined, “a pretty fix for a priest, truly, to have a baby left on his hands.”

“Yes, a pretty fix, indeed, as you say, and which for the time quite overwhelmed my poor brother.”

“But I suppose you managed to console the worthy priest.”

“Oh, yes. We had a long talk together, and ultimately we arranged that I should take it all upon myself.

“It appeared that evening, my brother Ambrose, after performing his religious duties for the night, went outside to close the shutters, and, as he stepped out of the portico, he stumbled and almost fell over this basket.

At first he thought it was a delicate gift from some parishioner who wished to surprise him, and not being at all averse to good living, took it inside, no doubt chuckling to himself.

"*You* can scarcely imagine his horror and dismay when he saw the contents of the basket, *I*, knowing him, *can*.

"For some quarter of an hour or so he was aghast, almost incapable of thought. After a time it occurred to him to come over to me—about the most sensible thing he could have done. And so it happened on that Friday night I heard him "gently tapping, so gently tapping," at my parlour window."

Old Knight chuckled at his little joke, and Leroy, artful young fox, laughed with him.

The bottle was now empty, and in spite of Leroy's remonstrances, Mr. Knight insisted on ringing the bell and ordering another.

"Well, now, sir," said Leroy; "tell me what happened on opening the fish-basket. I feel quite interested, and should have liked to have been present to have seen your brother's solemn countenance, and your own, full of repressed merriment, tempered by fraternal respect."

"My dear boy, you have just hit it; I did not like to hurt my brother's feelings, and yet I was nearly dying with laughter at the fun of the thing."

"Well, how did you settle it, I can guess," said Leroy.

"Ah, no! you can't; you'd never guess."

"Why, you said the child was left outside your own door; had it kept all warm and comfortable, and the next morning sent it off to the authorities."

Leroy knew all the time that this was not the course which the brothers, priest and layman, took."

"No, my boy, you're wrong," replied the old gentleman, chuckling. "I'll just tell you what we did. First, we opened the fish-basket; and there lay warmly swaddled up, as beautiful a little girl child as ever a mother's eye looked on. I don't know much about such matters, but the linen, and the clothes, and such things, were certainly of the best.

"The baby lay in a deep sleep, and, I think, must have been given some mild opiate, for she never woke when we took her out of the basket and looked at the clothes to see if there were any initials or marks of any kind, by which the person or persons who left her at my brother's door might be discovered.

"There was nothing whatever, with one exception, and this was three crosses, side by side, formed with common working cotton, such as washerwomen use as a means of distinguishing the linen of the families by whom they may be employed."

"But was there no letter, no memorandum, or anything of that sort?" asked Leroy.

"Yes there was, my boy," replied Mr. Knight.

"And here it is," he said, producing his pocket-book, and handing over a faded, torn, and dirty piece of paper to his guest.

Leroy took it, carefully unfolded it, and read it.

Thus it ran:—

Holy Father, Kind Priest, and Good Christian!—This in the basket, a living body and soul, is given to your charge. Some wish its death. To you its life is entrusted. God reward you!

"What do you think of it?" asked old Knight.

"Well," said Leroy, "I call it a staggerer."

"Yes, indeed. But that letter and the three crosses on the clothing are all the clue we have now as to the parentage of my adopted niece—Susie Knight; the prettiest, the best, the cleverest, the most talented girl in England, by God, sir!" said old Knight thumping the table.

"I quite agree with you," said Leroy, as he filled their two glasses; "we will drink her health."

This ceremony duly gone through, Leroy said—

"And now, sir, I am anxiously waiting to hear how you and your brother settled it."

"It was soon done. I am a man of very few words," said his host.

"Oh, I can see that," said Leroy, gravely, although his host had been gossiping for some three quarters of an hour, with scarcely a moment's pause.

“‘Brother Ambrose,’ I said, ‘just you go home. Leave the fish-basket and all that is in it with me, and I will settle it.’

“He wanted me to explain, but I would not. ‘Just go home, brother Ambrose,’ I repeated, ‘I’ll settle it, and when next I come to confession, it’ll be for you to fix the penance for the sin I have committed in doing so.’”

He went, and I set to work to put things right on what I considered a new and original plan.

“The servant, a strapping country wench, of some seven or eight and twenty, daughter of one of my small tenants, had gone to bed, as had the boy—as he was called though he was thirty, if he was a day, was Mickey Doolan.

“Seeing the basket with the infant fast asleep inside the hearth rug, at a moderate distance from the fire, I went upstairs and knocked at Bridget’s door.

“After some little time I woke her, for she was a sound sleeper, you must know.

“‘Biddy, Biddy, I want you.’”

“‘Ah! for shame now, masther, sure it’s an honest girl I am, and going to be married to Patsy O’Connor as you well knows—sure its the whiskey has got into your head to be disthurbin’ a poor girl this way.

“‘Don’t be a fool Bridget,’ I said, ‘get up and dress yourself, I want you on a matter of importance.’

“‘And won’t it wait till the morning masther,’ she asked dubiously.

“‘No it won’t,’ I said, ‘its just this; a relation of mine has arrived unexpectedly from England, and I want you to get up.’

“‘I’ll be down in ten minutes masther,’ replied Bridget, whose fears and scruples were soon put to rest.

“Before she came I placed the basket containing the baby behind the arm chair, opposite mine, so that she could not be able to see it.

“‘Now Bridget,’ I said, gravely, when she entered the room, staring stupidly round in search of the visitor she doubtless expected to see.

“‘I want to have a few words of very serious conversation with you, Bridget.’”

"Yes, masher."

"You are satisfied with your place? "

"Sure and I am."

"You are going to be married? "

"Faith and I hope so. and to Patsy Connor."

"And he's going to take the place, to look after the horse and car; so that you can both be together under the same roof."

"Your honour was kind enough to say so."

"You are fond of children? "

"Faith and I am, the darlins'."

"Hope to have some of your own one of these days, I suppose."

"Ah! your honour, shure you're making fun of me," she replied blushing.

"Not a bit of it; well now, I'll get on to business—You'd like a dowry when you are married."

"Shure and I would your honour, but there's little chance of my taking Patsy anything save myself and the few pounds I've saved."

"Fifty pounds, would be a very nice little sum for a dowry wouldn't it."

"Shure and it would," she said opening her eyes.

"Well you can have it, if you like."

"And who would be afther giving it to me? "

"I would."

"And what would I do to arn it," she asked looking doubtful.

"I'll tell you, you are a decent girl Bridget? "

"Shure I hope so."

"You can hold your tongue? "

"I can."

"Mind your own business? "

"Faith, I can, and not interfere with other people's."

"Then you are the girl for me, now I'll explain to you what I mean. I told you that a relation of mine had come over from England."

"You did your honour."

"It's a niece? "

"And is she here? " asked Bridget.

"She is."

“Did she come alone.”

“Not a bit of it, but the person who came with her has gone on into the town. Didn't you hear the sound of wheels.”

“Faith, and I think I did masther or its dhraming I was.”

“Well, what I want you to do is to take great care of this niece of mine, if anyone asks you impudent questions, just say that she arrived on Friday evening, and that's all you know about it. Will you do that?”

“Shure and I will your honour—But where's the young lady.”

“I rose from my arm chair, went behind the other one and taking the fish basket handed it to Bridget.

“Here you are Biddy, you will find the little lady inside.”

“At first she did not seem to understand me, but presently taking a peep inside the fish basket, saw the child.

“She gave a scream of astonishment and dismay, and then turning on me, said, with a knowing look.

“Oh! masther, but you're the sinner of the world. Faith and you'll have to do many a penance, ordered by your brother the priest, holy man, that he is.”

Little she guessed that the infant, in question, had been left at the priest's door, not mine.

“Well, see here Bridget, don't let's have any more words about it. Will you take charge of this little niece of mine, sure you wouldn't want me to send the poor thing away to strangers, or let it go to the parish.”

“It would be a sin and a shame to you if you did,” she replied, warmly, ‘and I'd be a cruel minded woman, if I didn't do as you asked me.’

“You shall have the dower I spoke of Biddy.”

“Dower or no dower, I'll do my duty by the poor innocent darlin' if the Lord spares me.”

“And so, Mr. Leroy, the worthy old gentleman said in conclusion it was settled, and I think in a very satisfactory manner to my brother the priest.”

“Yes, indeed,” said Leroy, I am sure the way in which you got out of the difficulty, does credit both to your head and heart.”

"I did the best I could, and I never had cause to repent it."

"And have you ever got any clue to the mystery as to how the child came to be left at your brother's door?"

"Never, but some five years ago, when Susie was just budding into woman-hood she received in a most mysterious way, a packet containing a miniature portrait of a lady, some ribbons, a pair of old gloves, and a gentleman's sleeve-links, with no crest or initials engraved, but only a coronet. We were never able to make anything out of it whatever."

"Of course Susie carefully treasures this up, by means of which we may some day arrive at the solution of the mystery of her birth."

"Up to the present, we know no more than on the night when she was left at my brother's portico."

"A most interesting real life romance," said Leroy, 'and allow me to say that you might consider yourself fortunate in having your charity rewarded in such a charming young lady as your adopted niece, Miss Susie Knight.'

"Quite true, sir, a better, kinder, true hearted girl than Susie never breathed—that puts me in mind, however,—haven't they been a long time away?"

Now, Leroy was just thinking the same thing, and wondering what on earth kept Fulford and the young lady.

"Oh! they will be back in a few minutes without doubt," he said.

"Fill your glass Mr. Leroy, we may as well finish the bottle while we are about it."

Leroy filled his glass and passed the bottle, and just then the servant girl entered with a note for Mr. Knight.

The old gentleman read it in evident astonishment, and perplexity, and then with a blank look handed it over to Leroy.

It was from Fulford, and to this effect.

My dear Sir,—I learn from my lawyer, that some of the deeds and documents necessary, in order for me to put you in the possession of the cottage, are at Woodford Grange.

Thinking it better to finish the matter "right off," as the Yankees say, I proposed to Miss Knight, that I should drive her over to the Grange, so that she might be able to return with the papers and give them to you. I told her that I was quite sure you would not be angry, as it was a matter of business. I feel sure that my cousin Florence will be most happy to make her acquaintance. Tell my friend Leroy that I will send back a trap for him immediately on our arrival at Woodford Grange, as of course Miss Knight will require some rest and refreshment before starting on her return journey. Should you feel disposed to accompany Mr. Leroy, I shall be most happy to see you at dinner at 7, and will send you home in the brougham.

Faithfully yours,

JOHN FULFORD.

Owen Knight Esq.

Leroy gave vent to an ejaculation.

"Well I'm d—d, this beats all."

"You don't think sir, I hope, that there is anything wrong—that—"

"Wrong, no, only that Jack Fulford has stolen a march upon me."

"I mean, you don't think that your friend has eloped with Susie, or anything of that sort."

"Oh, no, make your mind easy on that point," replied Leroy, laughing.

"Jack Fulford likes a bit of fun, but he is as honourable a man as ever walked. What do you say? Will you come over to dinner with me when the trap arrives?"

"Well, no thank you, I'm greatly obliged to Captain Fulford and should like it much, but I'm getting too old for gadding about the country, and as you say Susie is in good hands, I'll just wait here till she comes back."

CHAPTER XXXIII.

BILLIARDS—HIGH STAKES.

SCATTERBRAIN and John Graham, in the billiard room at Woodford Grange. Graham, the financial agent, losing games, which he might have easily won, for his own purpose.

This is the scene, at the exact time, when the history of Susie Knight is being narrated to Lambton Leroy

Scatterbrain had won two five pound notes, and John Graham proposed double or quits—to which his lordship assented.

"This is becoming serious," said the latter, "and I expect before we have done, I shall have to give you a mortgage on my Irish estates."

"But you are winning, my lord," said Graham.

"Yes, I know it, and you are 'pulling,' as they say in sporting phraseology."

Graham laughed, but did not like the allusion.

Scatterbrain rang the bell, and when the boy came ordered soda and gin.

They were playing even, and when the boy came back, Scatterbrain was eighteen to Graham's twelve.

"Miss Florence's compliments," said the boy, when he handed the soda-water. "But Lady Jane Vavasour and Captain Maitland have just come."

Now Scatterbrain was in love with Lady Jane, and, as the reader knows, was rather peculiarly circumstanced, she being under the escort of Captain Maitland.

Enough to make any man loose a game of billiards.

So thought John Graham, who saw in the Irish peer's annoyance a chance for getting on to heavy stakes.

"I will double the bets, my lord."

"Done!"

"If you will play for fifty pounds I will bet you two fifties to one on the game."

"Done again," said Scatterbrain.

The game now stood thus:— They were playing for fifty pounds, and John Graham was betting two fifties to one—a hundred to fifty.

Thus he stood to win a hundred and fifty pounds and lose a hundred.

These were, though not ruinously so, tolerably heavy stakes.

By arrangement, each played with the rest, for on account of the fractured collar bone, which had only just begun to set, Scatterbrain could not use his left arm.

This was if anything in favour of Graham, who, being the older player, had, of course, used the rest oftener than his antagonist.

After Scatterbrain heard that Lady Jane and Captain Maitland had arrived he missed several chances, and in fact played what is called a nervous game.

Before long John Graham was forty to his twenty-eight, and the game looked badly for his lordship.

"I will bet three to one," said Graham, as he prepared to make a losing hazard off the red into the middle pocket.

"What in?" asked Scatterbrain.

"Hundreds, if you like," said Graham, coolly.

"Done, in hundreds."

Graham played, made the hazard, and had a break by which he realised fifteen.

This brought his score up to fifty-five, whereas his opponent was only twenty-eight.

"Lord Scatterbrain now stood to lose two hundred pounds, if Graham won the game.

Graham on the other hand would lose a hundred and fifty and three hundred—four hundred and fifty in all—should the other prove the victor.

Scatterbrain, at this point of the game, had a slice of luck—he got a fluke and afterwards scored seven, ten in all, making him thirty-eight to Graham's fifty-five.

The latter next scored three, fifty-eight and thirty-eight, thus placing himself twenty ahead.

Scatterbrain now began to play recklessly, knocking the balls about in a random manner.

Nevertheless he scored ten points, principally flukes, to his adversary's five, thus reducing his lead to fifteen.

The odds, however, were greatly in favour of Graham, who played a steady, careful game, not troubling himself about the transient strokes of luck his opponent got, confident that he must win ultimately.

"I wonder where the blazes Jack Fulford and his friend have gone off to?" said Scatterbrain. "It's hardly the thing for us to be here in the billiard room, and no one with the ladies but Captain Maitland."

This speech caused Graham to miss a stroke.

He had a pretty good idea as to where Fulford and Leroy had gone, and felt considerably annoyed thereat.

The page brought Scatterbrain a note, one of those pink, scented, three-cornered little billets ladies so delight in.

Lord Scatterbrain,—Undeterred by past experience Lady Jane and I have again made a wager in which you are concerned. You are playing billiards—I have bet her that Mr Graham beats you. Please do lose, and oblige yours truly,
Florence.

This little note had on Scatterbrain the effect of a spur on a lazy horse, and favoured also by luck he scored fast.

The game stood at seventy-five all, and then John Graham calmly said—

"I stand to lose four hundred and fifty pounds. I will bet five hundred to three that I win this game."

"Done," said Scatterbrain, as promptly and coolly as if he had been taking a wager of half a crown.

They played on, and to the intense disgust and astonishment of Graham, his lordship scored ninety nine to the ninety two of the former.

It was Graham's stroke, and if he scored he had an excellent chance of winning.

It was a rather difficult cannon, requiring both side and screw.

Graham played without using the chalk, made a mis-cue and lost the game.

Taking out his pocket book, he wrote on a leaf I O U £950 0 0.

John Graham

"That is right I think, my lord."

"Quite right."

"I will give you a cheque by and bye. You will play again I suppose?"

"Oh, yes, certainly, I will give you your revenge."

"For what shall we play?"

"For what you like," replied Scatterbrain indifferently.

"Then we will say for what I have lost, nine hundred and fifty."

"As you like," replied his lordship. "I shall then stand to win nineteen hundred pounds, and can lose nothing."

"A very pleasant state of affairs indeed."

Graham spoke quietly and betrayed no other agitation, but he was pale, and a close observer, or any one who knew him well could have told that he was very savage, at having lost nearly a thousand pounds to this bumpkin lord."

However, he fully made up his mind to win it all back this game.

"Would it not be better," remarked Scatterbrain, as he placed his ball preparatory to the "stroke to play for a thousand guineas. Then if I win, you will owe me two thousand pounds exactly, and if I loose I shall owe you a hundred."

"Yes," replied Graham, "I think that would be a good plan."

Then they proceeded with the game, John Graham playing with great caution, while Scatterbrain, on the other hand was a little bit rash and careless.

Nevertheless, he played very well, making some difficult strokes, and in a little less than a quarter of an hour the game stood, Scatterbrain fifty eight, Graham fifty two, his lordship leading by six.

At this point Scatterbrain missed a difficult and dangerous hazard, thereby leaving a break on.

John Graham played and scored nineteen off the balls; this brought him to seventy-one to Scatterbrain's fifty-eight.

The latter now scored ten. Sixty-eight; seventy-one.

Next Graham made twelve.

Eighty-three, ninety-eight, then Scatterbrain scored eight, and Graham followed with six.

Eighty-nine, seventy-six.

It seemed long odds on Graham, who in reality was perhaps the better, because the more steady player.

It was Graham's turn to play, and he had an excellent chance as the other two balls were in the middle of the table, and his was in hand.

The sound of wheels on the gravel drive leading from the outer gates up to the front door, caused Scatterbrain to go to the window.

"Here come Fulford and his friend I suppose. Yes, I can recognise the chesnut horse, he generally drives in the dog-cart.

"Hallo, though," continued his lordship, "it's not Mr. Leroy he's got with him at all, but a lady. Wonder who it is.

John Graham, from a feeling of indescribable curiosity, put down his cue and came up to the long window which ran along all one side of the room.

It commanded a view of the lawn, and of a part of the carriage drive.

The dog-cart at the moment he looked out, was in the most favourable position for its occupants to be seen.

He recognised Susie Knight as she sat by Fulford's side, smiling at some remark the latter had just made.

"The little *prima donna* by all that's holy!" he cried, unable to repress the exclamation.

"You know her then?" asked Scatterbrain.

"I have met her," replied John Graham, and then proceeded with the game.

Scatterbrain observed that he turned very pale, when he recognised the young lady in the dog-cart, and that a strange, sullen, *vicious* expression, came on his face.

Evidently Mr. John Graham was deeply annoyed at the fact of Miss Susie Knight being brought over to Woodford Grange.—He lost the game.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

DEUS EX MACHINA.

Two young ladies in a drawing-room, employed themselves as young ladies under such circumstances generally do.

Captain Maitland found himself in a very awkward position. For after the first minute or so, during which conventual politeness made it necessary that he should be acknowledged, they calmly ignored him altogether, and fluttering together like two she-turtle-doves, began to whisper and smile, and nod, as young ladies do, when unburthening their hearts to each other. Captain Maitland having looked through all the portrait albums on the drawing-room table twice, and sworn inwardly at all their contents, for he was in a very bad humour, began to show signs of impatience.

This, Florence Gray, with woman's quick perception, noticed, and remembered her duties as hostess.

"Oh! Captain Maitland," she cried, with charming *naivete*, and impudence combined, "I quite forgot you! I wonder where the gentlemen are? I will ring and see."

She rang, and Captain Maitland replied, bowing and trying to force a smile—

"Thank you, Miss Gray; I am well aware of my own unworthiness, and should be insolent indeed, were I to expect my presence to be remembered by Miss Gray, or Lady Jane Vavasour—the queens of the county."

"Rival queens," said Lady Jane, vivaciously, "for Florence and I were just disputing, which of us was the acknowledged belle of the last ball."

"A difficult question to decide," said Maitland, "my heart would incline me to decide one way, my judgment the other."

"And which way does your heart incline," asked Florence maliciously.

Maitland was now decidedly in a fix, but fortunately for him the footman entered the room at that moment in answer to Florence's bell.

"Where are the gentlemen?" asked Florence.

"In the billiard-room."

"Are they playing?"

"Yes, Miss!"

"Will you give my compliments to them, and tell them that Lady Jane Vavasour, and Captain Maitland have arrived?"

"No! No!" put in Lady Jane, "we will have a bet!"

"What! After the result of the last one!" said Florence, reproachfully. "You are incorrigible."

"I will name the winner," said Lady Jane, "what will you wager Florence? I will back Lord Scatterbrain."

"Wilful girl," said Florence, "but I suppose you must have your way!"

Captain Maitland looked as black as thunder, but could not say anything, of course.

"And now you shall write a note, and I will dictate it," said Lady Jane, and pushing her friend into a chair, she placed pen, ink, and paper, before her.

Thus urged Florence penned the note to Lord Scatterbrain, which, as the reader knows, exercised such a beneficial effect on his play.

"My cousin and his friend Mr. Leroy, have gone out for a drive, Captain Maitland," said Florence, turning to that gentleman; "but we expect them back very shortly. Meanwhile you would perhaps like to join Lord Scatterbrain and Mr. Graham in the billiard-room."

Captain Maitland declined, declaring that he much preferred the company he was then in.

This might have been true on his part. However, the two young ladies manifested pretty complete indifference to his society, for they again commenced imparting to each other in low tones girlish confidences probably of the most trivial nature, and yet which, by the play of

features, and the smiles, intelligent glances, nods, raising of the eyebrows and so forth, might have been thought to be of the utmost importance.

Maitland was a very long way from being at his ease.

It was not by his own free will that he found himself at Woodford Grange, in the house of a man with whom he had had a serious quarrel, almost ending in violence, and who had for his guest this Irish peer, of whom he was intensely jealous.

It was Lady Jane's doing. Her uncle, Colonel Vavasour, had gone to London on business, and would be away for a couple of days.

The wayward beauty took it into her head suddenly, that she would visit her friend Florence, and expressed her wish to Captain Maitland in the most off hand manner.

"Captain Maitland, I wish to go to Woodford Grange."

"When—not to-day surely."

"Yes, to-day, this very afternoon?"

"Will you drive me over?"

"Really Lady Jane, you must excuse me."

"Very well, then, I shall have out the pony-chaise, and drive over alone."

Whereupon, without any more parley, she rang the bell.

Maitland saw that he must yield.

It was bad enough for her to go over in his company. To allow her to go alone would be deliberately giving Scatterbrain, of whom he was jealous, an opportunity.

Still he did not give up the point without a struggle.

"I am sure your uncle, Colonel Vavasour, would not approve of your going over to Woodford Grange."

"Then it will be for my uncle to signify to me his disapprobation. I am not aware that it is your place to threaten me with hypothetical and exceedingly problematical displeasure."

And so, when the servant came, Maitland was forced to give way, and in place of the pony-chaise, the mail phaeton and pair were ordered, and in a quarter of an hour Lady Jane and Captain Maitland, were on the road to Woodford Grange.

The return of Jack Fulford was welcome to all parties, even Maitland, who felt considerably embarrassed.

"There is the dog-cart," cried Florence, as Fulford drove up to the door, I know the sound of the wheels quite well.

It was indeed Fulford's dog-cart, and himself driving, but with Susie Knight seated by his side.

The drawing-room window only commanded a view of a very small portion of the carriage drive, so that the dog-cart was not seen by either of the young ladies, as Fulford drove up to the door.

Both Florence and Lady Jane Vavasour, rose to meet him as he entered the drawing room.

His cousin had not the slightest idea that he was accompanied by a lady.

Imagine then her astonishment, when taking Susie Knight, who came forward timidly, yet without awkwardness, by the hand, he presented her.

"Florence, allow me to introduce you to Miss Susie Knight, Miss Knight, my cousin Florence."

Florence was for a second or two so surprised that she could not say a word.

Then recovering herself she smiled, bowed, and shook hands with the young lady.

As she did so, she took a keen, rapid survey of her from head to foot, and saw that she was young, graceful, and pretty.

Fulford proceeded to introduce the companion of his drive, to Lady Jane Vavasour, and Captain Maitland.

The latter he shook hands with, so soon as he perceived him, feeling himself bound in his character of host to forget, or at all events ignore the unpleasantness which had taken place between them.

After the introductions had been gone through, it gradually dawned upon him that he had done a very bold thing, and would have considerable difficulty in carrying it through with credit and éclat.

Florence Grey saw that her cousin's companion was young and sweetly pretty, and in plain words, she was instantly intensely jealous of the stranger.

She watched her keenly, while she was being intro-

duced to Captain Maitland and Lady Jane, and felt all the more annoyed, because the young lady, though obviously shy, and perhaps a little nervous at finding herself suddenly in a grand drawing-room, in the society of grand people, did not display any awkwardness.

In truth, Susie Knight found herself in an embarrassing position.

With woman's keen perception, she saw instantly that she was regarded with curiosity by Lady Jane Vavasour, and with suspicion and distrust by Florence.

It wanted no words to inform her of this. With unerring instinct, she knew that Captain Fulford's cousin was angry and suspicious.

"Cousin Florence," said Fulford rather sharply, for he, too, could not but feel that there was a sort of general embarrassment all round. "You are very forgetful, Miss Knight would doubtless like to take off her bonnet and cloak. Will you ring for your maid and see to it?"

"I beg pardon," replied Florence, ringing the bell. "but I was so surprised, at your returning from your drive with a lady instead of Mr. Leroy, that I really did not think of it."

So soon as Miss Knight had left the room to be conducted up stairs, Fulford said—

"Miss Knight is the niece of one of my tenants, Mr. Owen Knight."

"Oh, indeed," said Florence, "a farmer I suppose."

"No, an independent gentleman, who occupies a house of mine."

"A house of yours, why, cousin," said Florence, "I did not know you had any buildings on your property, except cottages and farm-houses."

"Well this is a cottage, Myrtle cottage, in the outskirts of Lambton Buzzard."

"Oh!"

That was all Florence said, but it conveyed a world of meaning,

It expressed as plainly as if she had put it in words.

"So this is the sort of young person whom you

make the acquaintance of and drive over in a dog-cart, without warning or notice of any kind, the niece of a person occupying a wretched little five roomed cottage."

Jack Fulford saw, by the manner and expression of Florence, that there was a storm brewing.

He now half regretted the step he had taken, which he could not but own was very inconsiderate.

There was very little conversation during the absence of Susie Knight, and when she was shown into the drawing-room again, there was a dead silence.

The situation was awkward in the extreme, and Fulford, angry with his cousin, cursed his unlucky star at having led himself into such a scrape.

But fortunately just as things were at their worst, there came a *Deus ex machinâ*.

CHAPTER XXXV

SCATTERBRAIN AND SUSIE KNIGHT.

It was Lord Scatterbrain, whose opportune appearance in the drawing-room, relieved all parties from a somewhat embarrassing situation.

With the true instincts of a gentleman, throwing on one side all feelings of jealousy and bitterness, he offered his hand to Captain Maitland at once--

"I am glad to see you, Sir ; I hope you are well !"

His Lordship's manner was not remarkable for polish, but what he said was evidently frankly spoken and from the heart ; and, Lady Jane, keenly watching how her rival suitors would behave, could not but acknowledge that Scatterbrain showed to the best advantage of the two ; for Maitland, though he was not rude enough to refuse the proffered hand, drew himself up, bowed stiffly, said briefly, "Quite well, thank you, my Lord," and then

turned away ; obviously unable to disguise his ill humour.

Scatterbrain next turned his attention to Lady Jane, in which quarter he met with a more favourable reception.

There was nothing particular in her words, but her manner—ah ! the manner was everything.

Maitland saw, and gnashed his teeth—mentally of course, for now-a-days people are not in the habit of gnashing their teeth, or biting their lips till the blood comes, in drawing-rooms.

For if a bright glance, a winning smile, and a conscious flush, on a fair cheek can tell a tale, it was thus told by Lady Jane Vavasour, as she welcomed his Lordship of Scatterbrain.

Jack Fulford now spoke, for Lady Jane engrossed Scatterbrain's attention—possibly from a tinge of that petty meanness inherent in all women, from princess to peasant-girl, which makes them delight in petty triumphs over their own sex.

"Lord Scatterbrain," said his host, "I must beg to introduce to your notice, this young lady, Miss Susan Knight, a countrywoman of yours."

Now, in fact, Scatterbrain had not observed the young lady at all, it being dusk and the candles not yet lighted. He instantly rose and proceeded to apologise with the utmost *naivete* and frankness—

"I beg ten thousand pardons," he said, "I do believe I am the biggest fool in the three kingdoms."

And thereupon, to atone for his oversight he devoted his attentions to Susan Knight.

"And so you are an Irish young lady?" he said, "but I could have known that, without being told, for I have noticed that the prettiest girls are always country-women of mine."

Whereupon Lady Jane observed laughingly, and yet with the slightest tinge of anger in her voice.

"Thank you, Lord Scatterbrain, on behalf of myself, and Florence ; we humbly bow to your verdict. A second Paris has come to judgment!"

Scatterbrain looked confused, for he saw, as the colloquial saying is, that he had put his foot in it ; and

that in endeavoring to atone to Miss Knight for his culpable neglect, by an extravagant compliment, he had half offended Lady Jane Vavasour.

Jack Fulford smiled, and said, "Scatterbrain, I am afraid, that between these three ladies, you will have a hard time of it, and in trying to avoid Scylla, will fall into Charybdis."

"If their wit is only as keen, as their beauty is bright," replied Scatterbrain, "I have no earthly chance. I am a vanquished knight before even I have donned my armour."

"Goodness gracious," cried Lady Jane, "I declare Lord Scatterbrain must have been reading *Ivanhoe*, or the *Seven Champions of Christendom*! His language is so charmingly chivalric, and mediæval."

"Faith! and I'll own I did read *Ivanhoe*, and liked it. He was a fine fellow, and so was King Richard. But as to what you say about mediæval, upon my soul, I do not know what the word means!"

Everybody laughed at this frank avowal, except Susan Knight; who looked at the Irish peer in some astonishment. For she alone of the company was ignorant of the peculiar circumstances under which his Lordship passed his early life.

Scatterbrain, whose eye and perception were keen as those of a hawk, noticed this wondering expression on the young lady's face.

"I must tell you, Miss Knight," he said, without the slightest embarrassment, "that I am only an uneducated bumpkin, though a peer. I didn't know that I was heir to a title and estates, till long after I was twenty, and couldn't read till three years ago."

Little Susan, knowing nothing of this circumstance, looked even more astonished at the extraordinary avowal.

"Oh! I forgot to tell you, Miss Knight," said Jack Fulford, explanatorily, "there is quite a romance attaching to Lord Scatterbrain's earlier days."

"Oh!" said Susan Knight, smiling "and so there is a romance, about my early life, and origin."

"Indeed!" said Scatterbrain, "Oh! then we must ex-

change confidences, I will tell my story, and you yours."

"Oh, I have very little to tell—my uncle knows all about it though."

A bond of sympathy was instantly created between these two, and Lady Jane Vavasour, though she would not have owned as much even to herself, felt by no means pleased, on observing Scatterbrain take his seat by the strange young lady, and devote all his attention to her.

In fact, his lordship found Susan Knight charming. She was at once frank—innocent, and lady-like, and the slight tinge of Milesian accent in her language fell pleasantly on his Irish ears.

By and by Jack Fulford proposed a little music, and without much difficulty persuaded Susan Knight to take her seat at the piano, and favour the company with a song.

She chose a simple Irish ballad, to the great delight of Lord Scatterbrain.

There could be no two opinions as to the quality, sweetness, and purity of her voice, and the other two ladies, who, not altogether unnaturally, felt a little jealousy and suspicion of this pretty stranger so unexpectedly introduced to them, couldn't but acknowledge that both in voice, musical taste, and execution the young lady was almost perfect.

Although the little feeling of jealousy, and distrust on the part of Florence and Lady Jane of the young stranger was not to be dissipated all at once, the situation became more pleasant, and all began to feel more at their ease.

Lord Scatterbrain, who was in excellent humour, contributed greatly to make things agreeable, and more than once provoked the laughter of the ladies by his quaint anecdotes of the Irish peasantry, picked up, of course, from general observations during his earlier days.

And it is a certain fact, that there is no more certain dispeller of any little embarrassment, or unpleasantness among a party, than laughter, in which all can join. There is a Spanish proverb.

"Beware of a man who never laughs."

And in good truth, there is much sound sense in the advice, for he must be indeed a saturnine-minded, gloomy-natured, and humanly speaking, bad-hearted man who refuses or is unable to join in the mirth of his fellow men.

The time passed quickly and pleasantly enough, Susan Knight favouring with several songs, not making any fuss or falsely professing disinclination when asked, but frankly acquiescing at once.

Lights had been brought, and Fulford looking at his watch, exclaimed—

"By Jove—it is getting on for seven o'clock—nearly time to dress for dinner. Cousin Florence you must take Miss Knight under your charge, and do the best you can for her. Of course you will stay to dinner, Miss Knight, and then I will send you home, with the documents.

"But," replied Susan doubtfully, "will not my uncle be displeased?"

"Oh, dear no. You know I have sent him a note, explaining that you are all safe, and inviting him to dinner himself. I don't suppose the old gentleman will come at so short a notice. But at all events Leroy will be here very shortly, and he will doubtless bring a message from your uncle.

"Ah! yes," said Susan smiling, "so he will, I shall be most happy to stay to dinner, I assure you. But you must excuse my dress, for of course you know I have nothing with me."

"Oh! for the matter of that," replied Fulford in an off hand way; "my cousin Florence could rig you out. But there is not the least necessity for you to change, you look charming as you are. It is one of the advantages of black silk that it can be worn on almost any occasion."

Now this speech was for various reasons extremely displeasing to Florence, and she favoured her cousin with a by no means amiable look, as she replied coldly.

"Oh! of course my wardrobe is at the service of Miss

Knight." Her aunt, Miss Shuttleworth, now entered the room, and to her Florence said briskly.

"Oh! aunt, I have been thinking over what we were talking about last night, and have made up my mind—I quite agree with you that it is very dull here, and that our visit to Captain Fulford has been quite long enough—too long, I am afraid. I am ready to start for London *en route* for Brighton, to-morrow."

The old lady looked, as well she might, astonished, for the subject had only once been mentioned between them in the most cursory way, and Florence did not evince the slightest desire to leave Woodford Grange for the present.

This speech on the part of his cousin, was to speak colloquially a hard "slap in the face" for Jack Fulford.

He saw that he had offended his high-spirited cousin, and cursing his ill luck, owned that he had been a great deal too clever in driving Susan Knight over in this off-hand, and unexpected manner.

Just at the moment, Mr. John Graham joined the party, and almost immediately after him, Lambton Leroy, who had returned.

The latter was very pale, and what was quite unusual with him, looked grave, and was evidently deeply concerned about something.

Florence, whose perception was remarkably acute, noticed this instantly, and felt sure that there was something the matter, though she could not divine what.

John Graham shook hands with Susan Knight, greeting her warmly, to the astonishment of the other two ladies, who were not aware that he was acquainted with her.

Then Graham turned to Lord Scatterbrain, and handed to him a piece of folded paper.

"A cheque my lord, which I think you will find makes us square."

"Oh it did not matter," replied Scatterbrain carelessly, "any time would have done."

"But it did matter," said Graham in a low tone, "debts of honour, should always be paid at the time."

"Ah! Lord Scatterbrain," exclaimed Lady Jane who now wished to attract him to herself, "you two gentlemen, have been playing billiards for money, gambling in fact, and you have won from Mr. Graham. I understand you see, my lord—how much have you won?"

To some people this would have been an embarrassing question.

Not a bit so to Scatterbrain however, who quietly tossed the cheque he had just received into Lady Jane's lap.

John Graham looked as black as thunder, and for once in his life forgetting himself, allowed his anger to overpower his prudence and in fact lost his head.

"I will trouble you for that cheque Lady Jane Vavasour," he said, reaching out his hand.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

TWO THOUSAND POUNDS!

LADY JANE VAVASOUR, quite unaccustomed to be thus addressed by a person, almost a stranger, drew back, stared haughtily, and said in a tone of surprise and anger mingled.

"Sir!"

But John Graham meant to have the cheque back if possible, and was foolish enough to press the point.

"Excuse me—but I really must insist on your giving me back that cheque, I fancy I have made a mistake."

He endeavoured to speak as if at his ease; but the pallor of his face and the expression of his features were sufficient to show any one that he was deeply annoyed.

Lady Jane Vavasour rose, and with an inimitable air of aristocratic hauteur, advanced a step or two towards Lord Scatterbrain.

"My lord," she said, "I am quite at a loss to understand the meaning of Mr. Graham's conduct and language. I have much pleasure in returning to you, from whom I received it, this cheque, which is for two thousand pounds. I presume that you came by it honorably, notwithstanding Mr. Graham's extraordinary behaviour."

Then with a slight flush on her lovely face, and with flashing eyes, Lady Jane Vavasour, reseated herself.

The situation was now exceeding awkward and unpleasant, peculiarly so for Leroy, who having introduced John Graham was in a measure responsible for him, and to Fulford who was the host.

Lord Scatterbrain coloured up and said quietly.

"If Mr. Graham wishes his cheque back again, it is quite at his service."

With these words, he tendered the little slip of paper representing no less a sum than two thousand pounds to Graham.

But the latter now saw what a false position he had placed himself in, and though really deeply annoyed—anger burning in his breast, had sufficient self command to put an end to the scene.

Forcing a laugh, he said—

"I must apologise to Lady Jane Vavasour; the fact is, I was schoolboy enough to feel annoyed at my folly and stupidity in losing a rather considerable sum, to be publicly exposed—indeed," he added with obvious bitterness "I did not think it was usual in good society for billiard-room bets, to be made the subject of drawing-room boasting.

Scatterbrain, had so much the best of the situation, that he was able to bear this taunt without betraying the slightest annoyance:

"On my faith and honour," he said, good humouredly, "I'm very sorry if I have done anything wrong, and can only plead ignorance, not having been accustomed for so long a time, to good society—as Mr. Graham was good enough to remind me of. And, Lady Jane I humbly ask pardon for taking such a liberty as to boast to you of my winnings in the billiard-room."

"Indeed, Lord Scatterbrain, you have nothing to apologise for. I asked you how much you had won, and you, as bound in gallantry gave me a prompt answer, by handing me this *gentleman's* cheque."

As she said the last words, she inclined her head very slightly towards Graham, but contrived to put a great deal of scornful meaning in her tone.

He bowed, but did not trust himself to reply, having already got so much the worst of the encounter.

Of course he refused to receive the cheque back, and addressing Leroy, said—

"I should like to have a few words with you, before I dispatch my London letters."

"Very well! I will join you in your room, before before you have dressed for dinner."

Mr. Graham then bowed to the company, and left the drawing-room, with the bitter consciousness that he had been beaten in a trial of skill by Scatterbrain, and lost two thousand pounds to him, and had moreover shewn bad temper, and bad breeding in company.

For assuredly having given a cheque to Scatterbrain, the latter had a right to do with it as he pleased, and under no conceivable circumstances should he have demanded it back from Lady Jane Vavasour.

"And have you really won two thousand pounds of Mr. Graham," asked Leroy, who, thinking that the financial agent, was a shrewd, hard-headed man, felt proportionately surprised.

"Yes—I could scarcely help it. We began at first for small amounts. I had remarkable luck, and inspired with the hope of winning the wager of Lady Jane, who did me the honour to back me, I think I may fairly say that I played much better than usual."

"I am very glad indeed that you won," said Lady Jane.

"And so am I," said Florence Grey.

"Scatterbrain," remarked Fulford, "you are a lucky fellow, to have both these young ladies on your side."

"Mr. Graham, as I understand, is a man of business, is a keen, money making man. Is it not so Mr. Leroy?"

"So I always thought, but evidently on this occasion he has met more than his match."

"I should have been very sorry," said Florence, "if Lord Scatterbrain, who avowedly, and notoriously, has had little experience of the world, should have lost heavily to Mr. Graham, especially as the guest of Captain Fulford, my cousin."

"You are quite right Florence, as you always are," replied Fulford, who was anxious to make his peace with Florence, if possible.

"You see Lord Scatterbrain, if you had lost people might have said that you had been beguiled into playing for high stakes, against a keen man of business—a man of the world in fact. Whereas he having lost can have no one to blame but himself, and I repeat that I am very glad you are the winner."

This speech was from Jane Vavasour, and if a bright glance and smile could signify anything, the words came from her heart.

Scatterbrain's star was now obviously in the ascendant, whilst Graham had lost heavily, not only in purse, but in esteem, especially as regarded the latter with the ladies.

"On my faith, and honour," said his lordship, almost apologetically, "I don't know how it happened, I kept on winning though he often got ahead of me. Then he proposed to increase the bets, and I, feeling that my luck was in, made no difficulty. He was leading and looked like winning, when I heard the wheels of the dog-cart, and saw Fulford and this young lady arrive. For some reason or other, after I had called Graham's attention to the fact, he missed nearly every thing, played rashly and carelessly, and fortune still favouring, I won as the saying is on the turf, 'in a canter.'"

Leroy could well understand that Graham would be in a desperate rage at seeing Fulford drive up the carriage way with Susan Knight by his side, and now he could account for the astute, money-making man of business losing his temper and his money at the same time.

For he remembered what a strong point Graham had

made of Leroy's not interfering with him in any way as regarded the charming, and talented young lady

To tell the truth our friend scarcely knew whether to rejoice at or regret Graham's discomfiture.

On the one hand he had not forgotten the cool, off-hand manner in which Graham almost forced him to acquiesce in a bargain almost offensive in its terms as to Susie Knight, a bargain which humiliated and annoyed him. Not that he cared for the young lady he persuaded himself, but because the man of business did not scruple to show his opinion that Leroy was in his power—for the time at least.

The more Leroy thought about it, the more he chafed at being subject to such conditions from any man.

Indeed he had once almost made up his mind to tell Graham bluntly to go to the devil, open his heart fully to Jack Fulford and to ask if he could and would help him tide over his present dilemma.

Now there is no doubt that this would have been his wisest course.

But opposed to this there was a certain repugnance in his mind—a feeling of delicacy sufficient to prevent him doing so.

It seemed to him such an unworthy part to play—to come to Fulford's place, introduce this Graham as his friend, and then, when the latter declined to carry out the implied arrangement, because he would not agree to certain arbitrary terms, to fall back on his host.

Jack Fulford, having left the room for a short time, returned at this juncture.

"Gentlemen and ladies: Dinner will be on the table in less than half an hour. I am happy to inform you that the wind has shifted to the north-east bringing with it rain and sleet."

"Happy to inform us!" cried Lady Jane, "goodness gracious, Captain Fulford, how can you say such a thing. However shall we get home. You know that Captain Maitland drove me over in an open trap."

"However can you get home?" replied Fulford smiling, "why not at all to-night, so you and Captain Maitland must perforce accept my hospitality."

"I leave myself in the hands of Lady Jane," said Maitland, shrugging his shoulders.

"You could not do better, I am sure," replied the host, "so we will consider that as settled."

"But about me, Captain Fulford," said Susie Knight, anxiously, "you promised to send me back early, and uncle will be *so* anxious."

"My dear young lady the brougham is at your service as soon after dinner as you think fit."

Leroy, who had been waiting for an opportunity to draw Fulford on one side and speak to him privately, now did so.

"My dear boy," he said, "I must have a few words with you."

"Will not after dinner do?"

"No, by no means, what I have to say is important and immediate."

"Well, come up to my room so soon as you have finished with Graham. I heard him say he wished to see you."

Fulford now opened the drawing-room door, and himself escorting Miss Knight to the foot of the stair-case leading to the bedchambers, went off to his own room, and so Leroy had no chance of any conversation with him, much as he wished it.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

GRAHAM PROPOSES A COMPACT TO LEROY.

"I WONDER what he has to say to me," thought Lambton Leroy, as he slowly walked towards Graham's room, "perhaps the losing this money to Scatterbrain

has caused him to abate his pretensions—taken him down a peg or two, as the saying is.”

“Perhaps, too, it has hit him hard, and he has no more money to spare.”

Thus pondering to himself he entered Graham’s dressing-room, which communicated with the bed-chamber.

There was a bright fire burning in the grate, two wax candles were on the mantel-piece, and Mr. John Graham dressed for dinner, all but the coat, which hung on the back of the large dimity covered arm-chair, drawn up close to the fender, seemed very comfortable.

And indeed, so he ought to have been, for Captain Fulford took special pride in his bedchamber arrangements, every room being fitted up with bathroom, hot and cold water, and dressing-room adjoining.

If, however, he was or ought to have been physically at his ease, it did not seem that he was mentally.

“So you have been losing money to this Irish lord,” said Leroy, “two thousand pounds, too. A hard hit for any one, however well able to afford it.”

“Oh, d—n the money! it is not that which troubles me.”

“Glad to hear it. You rich men can afford to take things coolly. How came you to let him beat you—I thought you were too hard-headed to lose two thousand in an afternoon, and at billiards, too, of all things in the world.”

“Now look here Leroy,” replied Graham snappingly. “I have told you I don’t care a curse about the money. It’s not that which annoys me.”

Lambton Leroy did not like his tone and manner at all, so in his turn spoke sharply—

“On my word, I neither know or care what annoys you or what does not. I came up here because you said you wished to speak to me, and I presume you have something to say beyond shewing off your ill-temper.”

“Yes I have. I have to speak on business matters, to refer to a conversation we had the other day, when we drove over to Lambton Buzzard.”

"Go ahead," said Leroy leaning against the mantel-piece, and speaking with the utmost indifference.

For to tell the truth, at the moment he felt just in the humour to quarrel with Graham, out and out, in fact to tell him to go to the devil at any risk.

"You remember the subject of our conversation?"

"Yes."

"I spoke to you on two matters, one, your affair about this money you want at once. The other, my affair about this young lady, Miss Susan Knight, in whose exquisite voice, appearance, and talent, I see the source of large profits in the future. I speak plainly because as you know, money-making is my business."

"I should have thought from the result of your afternoon's experience with Scatterbrain," replied Leroy quietly, "that money losing was more in your line."

It was a hard hit, but he could not resist the temptation, the opportunity was so tempting.

He watched Graham, closely thinking that he would lose temper.

But in this he was mistaken.

The other was a man not likely to commit a fault of the same nature twice within twenty-four hours, and he knew now how foolishly he had behaved to allow his annoyance to be seen in the drawing room.

"Very possibly," he replied, quite coolly, "perhaps it suited me to lose to Lord Scatterbrain."

"What, two thousand pounds? I have heard of throwing sprats to catch a whale, but this was certainly a very large sprat."

"I never meant nor insinuated anything of the kind," replied Graham, yawning.

"What I said was, that possibly it might suit me to lose money to Lord Scatterbrain."

"And your temper too, as you did in the drawing room?" asked Leroy, who appeared to be in the mood to annoy the other if he could.

A close observer might have noticed a quick change of expression in Graham's face, a sudden gleam in the cold grey eyes. Both expression and angry look in the

eyes, however vanished instantly. It came like a flash, and disappeared as quickly.

Whatever might have been the case a short time previously, he had obviously now got his temper thoroughly under command.

In reply to Leroy's satirical question, he said without a trace of annoyance in voice, or manner—

"Possibly so, but that is neither here nor there. Let us get back to business."

"At your service."

"I have only to repeat almost in the same words, what I said to you before. If you wish me to serve you, if indeed the trifling matter you were speaking of is a service. I expect, at least you will not stand in my way, would rather go out of the road to avoid the thwarting any arrangement or plans of mine."

"What is it you require," asked Leroy, "just state it as briefly as possible, and I will reply to you plainly."

"Very good. I believe that this girl Susan Knight, has the makings of a great and successful singer. She is a charming young lady, has everything in her favour, youth, talent, beauty, and innocence."

"And so in order to secure her for yourself, you wish to warn everybody off the field. To put your *taboo* on her, in fact."

"Precisely," replied Graham coolly.

"Whether it be to her advantage or not?"

"Exactly," was the answer in the same careless manner.

"Even though your honourable notice might prove damaging to her future prospects, perhaps to her reputation even."

"We need not discuss that point," replied John Graham, in the same cool and collected manner. "I have spoken quite plainly enough."

"You have indeed," said Leroy, with a tinge of bitterness in his voice.

"Then, my good fellow, give me your answer, and don't let us make any more words about it."

"And suppose I refuse to accede to your terms?"

"Then," said Graham, rising, and putting his coat on,

"I cannot oblige you in what you require ; on the other hand if you accede, I will write you a cheque this evening. Come, what do you say ? I see you are not dressed for dinner, you will be late."

"I will give you an answer later. At present I feel disposed to say no."

"Very good, any time will suit me."

Leroy nodded and hurried to his own room.

Dinner had been served when he went down, and as Jack Fulford when he saw him, had Susan Knight on his arm, escorting her from the drawing room, he had no opportunity to speak to him privately.

So he lingered behind, and hastily wrote a few lines in his note-book, tore out the leaf, and stopping a footman told him to give it to his master unobserved if possible.

"I have had news about Miss Knight's uncle, something has occurred of a most serious character. I have had no opportunity of speaking to you alone. So soon as the ladies have gone, leave the room on some excuse, and I will follow you ; I assure you this is important."

LAMBTON LEROY.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE DINNER PARTY AT WOODFORD GRANGE.

THE dinner party that evening at Woodford Grange was awkward and embarrassing to most of the company.

In the first place there was Mr. John Graham ; he, to begin with, had lost two thousand pounds (much against his will), notwithstanding the indifferent manner in which he spoke of it in his dressing-room.

Then he had made a fool of himself by showing temper in the drawing-room, and had been brought to task severely by Lady Jane Vavasour ; and lastly,

his conversation with Leroy had not tended to make him self-complacent, for from our friend's manner he could see he had almost made up his mind to "kick over the traces," and tell him in plain terms that he might go to the devil, for that his assistance was not worth the price in money and submissiveness to be paid. ; consequently, though he had resumed his self-command and looked as quiet and impassive as an owl, could not force his features to wear a pleasant or satisfied expression.

Next to him sat Lambton Leroy. He entered flushed and excited, for beyond his decidedly unpleasant interview with Graham, he had another weighty matter on his mind on which he had sent a brief note to Fulford. He saw him receive it, and so did Florence Grey, too, and watched her cousin's concerned expression as he caught Leroy's eye and replied to the note by a slight motion of the head.

She knew at once there was something the matter, for she was quick at reading faces, and saw that Leroy looked very much concerned—her cousin scarcely less so.

She employed her thoughts in guessing what could have happened to necessitate a note from Leroy to Fulford, at the contents of which both were obviously so concerned.

"What can it be?" she thought.

And then with a tinge of romance inherent in most ladies—certainly in all young and handsome ones—she answered to her self-asked question.

"A duel?"

But then her common sense came to her aid.

Surely if any of these gentlemen were going to fight a duel there would be no necessity to send a note during dinner.

At least that could wait until the ladies had retired to the drawing-room.

Then she remembered that Leroy had not had an opportunity of speaking alone with her cousin since they had returned from Lambton Buzzard; and moreover this young lady with the light eyes and keen sight

and perception noted an occasional glance from both her cousin and Leroy cast upon Miss Knight.

And in those glances she read pity, concern, embarrassment.

So the affair gradually unfolded itself to her thus :—

“Lambton Buzzard ! my cousin and Mr. Leroy drive off there together. Jack comes back alone with a young lady—this Miss Knight—a most improper proceeding, and one about which he shall hear more yet. After him by some hours returns Mr. Leroy, who has been with this young lady’s uncle ; he looks very grave, obviously deeply annoyed about something.

“Ah ! now I see it. Old Mr. Knight, whoever he is, naturally resents this bold proceeding on the part of his niece, determines she shall never again cross his threshold, that he will cast her off for ever.

“Mr. Leroy seeing that this mad escapade is to have a serious *finale* looks grave, and not being able to speak to his friend alone, sends him a note by the footman to apprise him of what has happened.

“Yes, that is it. I’m sure I have discovered the secret.”

So thought and decided Florence Grey, after mature consideration.

In the process of thus finding a satisfactory solution of the mystery she was extremely silent, and by her distraught, absent manner, contributed to make this dinner party more unpleasant than ever to nearly all concerned.

There was only one person completely at her ease, and that was the old lady, the aunt of Jack Fulford and Florence Grey.

She knew nothing at all of any unpleasantness—only that there were three more than the expected company, namely, Captain Maitland, Lady Jane Vavasour, and Miss Knight.

The latter she supposed to be a friend of either Florence or Lady Jane, for her niece had said nothing to her on the subject, and her nephew had contented himself with merely introducing her.

Captain Maitland was by no means delighted with the state of affairs.

Lord Scatterbrain and Lady Jane were seated next each other, either designedly on one or both their parts, or by accident.

And what little conversation and merriment there was at this dismal dinner took place between these two last.

Scatterbrain was in excellent temper and spirits.

And, indeed, he had reason to be so, for had he not won two thousand pounds?

But, moreover, was he not often favoured with a charming smile and bright glance from one of the handsomest and most admired beauties of the county? Too often for the peace of mind of Captain Maitland.

Susie Knight, knowing little or nothing of all these complications and annoyances subsisting between others of the party, was tolerably at her ease.

On her sweet, innocent face there was an expression of natural timidity at finding herself in such grand company, nearly all strangers to her and pleasureable excitement.

In the quiet life which she and her uncle led, she had no experience of the brilliance of what was to her host an every-day dinner party.

The bright light thrown by many wax candles, the beautiful epergne, the glistening plate on the table, with the still greater display on the side-board, the changes of dishes, abundance of sparkling wine assiduously served by liveried footmen, all this and much more was nearly entirely new to her.

With her plain black silk dress, fastening close up to the throat, around which was only a snowy white little collar, her dark hair neatly braided around her head of classic mould, with neither wreath, flower, or ornament of any description, she presented a contrast, not altogether an unfavourable one, to the other young ladies with their low-cut muslin dresses, flowers in hair, braceleted wrists, and jewelry laden ears.

Jack Fulford on casting his gaze on her, and her eyes meeting his, received a bright smile, and at the same time perceived a slight blush mantle her pretty face.

"By Jove," he said, "the most charming little bijou of a girl I ever met in my life. If I am not careful I shall be falling in love with her."

And shortly afterwards Lambton Leroy was caught by the young lady with his eye fixed on her with an earnest, pitying gaze.

Susie coloured up a deeper crimson this time, and though by a smile she showed she was not displeased, she was much more confused than on the other occasion.

"Upon my soul," thought Leroy to himself, "a delightful little angel. Pretty, innocent, graceful, and lady-like—a gem of the first water.—It's my firm belief I shall fall in love with her—and that would never do."

And then after a bit this question arose in his mind.

"And why not?"

So it will be observed that Leroy had gone much farther than his friend Fulford—in his admiration for Susie Knight and the feelings engendered thereby.

And Mr. John Graham silently regarding her with stealthy glances, for he was careful she should not catch him gazing at her, also thought to himself—

"A delightful little nightingale, with the gentle disposition of the dove, elegant and beautiful as a swan. It must be my business to see that no other fowler than myself beguiles her into his net. Commercially speaking she must be profitable, and with a little polish to be gained by experience, presentable; even an object of pride, in any society I should choose to take. Not George the fourth, roystering King Charles, nor fascinating, handsome Rochester—no, nor any other man of pleasure and of the world, ever had such a charming mistress as will I, John Graham, in Susie Knight."

He set his teeth and a look of hard determination came over his features as this thought passed through his mind a few moments afterwards.

"But it will require attention, skill, care, and, above all, caution."

There are other hunters who have cast their eyes on this sweet gazelle. But I must beware lest by acting prema-

turely I drive the timid, docile little animal into the grasp of some other beast of prey. It shall be done—although I know I shall have rivals in the field, if, indeed, I have not already.

“There is Leroy, he is a fool and I do not fear him much.

“Then there is this Captain Fulford. He, too, may possibly be a little smitten. But I think from what I see there is some sort of an engagement between him and his cousin, Miss Florence. At least she is jealous of the little girl, and that is all in my favour.

“And lastly, there, is this confounded Lord Scatterbrain, whose estates I mean to have the management of, He does not seem to bestow much attention on my nightingale, my little *primâ donna* that is to be, and yet, somehow, I fear his interference most. He is a fool—not, however, without wit and that accursed straightforward manner, just the thing to captivate an innocent girl like this.”

At this juncture the ladies rose and left the room.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

LORD SCATTERBRAIN'S WATCH.

So soon as the ladies had retired to the drawing room the gentlemen drew up together nearer to the head of the table and the fire.

Jack Fulford, after taking a fresh bottle of port just decanted, looked at it knowingly, held it up to the light, then sipped it again.

“I do believe that fellow of mine has been taking from the wrong bin. I'm sure I've got an older and better wine than this to offer you, gentlemen. I'll go into the

cellar myself and see. Come with me Leroy, there's a good fellow, you know I'm timid, afraid of ghosts and all that sort of thing."

"Oh! yes, certainly, only you must look after me, I can tell you my boy, or I may walk off with a few bottles of that celebrated eighteen four nine."

"Quite welcome for my part. I'll promise not to prosecute you for petty larceny."

When the host and Leroy had left, there remained only Scatterbrain, Captain Maitland and Mr. John Graham.

Scatterbrain was the only one who was not in an ill humour, but of course with two wet blankets in a party of three the time did not pass very quickly or pleasantly.

The Irish peer once or twice tried good humouredly to improve matters by venturing a few remarks.

Graham only forced the shade of a sour smile, and Captain Maitland took no more notice when addressed than he could possibly help, or even not that indeed, and sometimes only a slight inclination of the head, between a grin and a nod, was what he would vouchsafe.

"I wonder what the devil is keeping our friends so long?" remarked Scatterbrain, addressing Maitland in such a direct manner, that the latter could not help replying—

"I believe Captain Fulford said he was going down into the cellar, and asked Mr. Leroy to accompany him."

"They've been gone five and twenty minutes by my watch," said his lordship, producing a large chronometer and chronograph, with stops and all sorts of contrivances to tell minutes, seconds, and even half seconds, occupied by a horse race or any other event.

Captain Maitland said not a word in reply, but merely shrugged up his shoulders.

This was about the fifth time Scatterbrain had tried to break through the reserve and icy coldness existing between the three guests in Fulford's dining-room.

Nor neither of the two, except Mr. John Graham, had noticed that there was anything peculiar in the affair

It seemed such an ordinary matter for a gentleman

who thought his butler had made some mistake with the wine, to go down into his cellar himself, and ask a friend to accompany him.

Graham, however, had observed the serious and significant glances exchanged between the two gentlemen, and from this and other indications, "trifles light as air," to others but which his keen, and innate perceptions put a meaning on.

And he felt certain that there was some secret, mysterious, serious, with regard to Susie Knight.

He could not for the life of him ever guess at the nature of what it was, but he felt there was something, and was greatly annoyed that he was not in the secret.

However, he had sense enough to see that he would do no good by brooding and being sulky before Lord Scatterbrain, who in his turn might take offence at the obstinate taciturnity, of the other two left with him in the dining-room.

So when his lordship produced his watch, and declared that they had been absent five and twenty minutes, Mr. Graham thought it judicious to seem at least a little more amiable, for he by no means intended to quarrel with the wealthy young Irishman, nor had he in any respect relinquished his future plans with regard to himself becoming financial and general manager of his lordship's estate and fortune.

"That's a handsome watch my Lord," he said, affecting keen interest. "I observed it before, a chronometer or repeater I should say."

Now Scatterbrain was very fond of this said watch, and was too open hearted to disguise the fact.

"Faith, it is, and more too, it's a chronograph what that means I dare say you know. I didn't, I'll own, till they told me in the shop. A mighty civil gentleman to be sure, he was the manager, or foreman, or masther may be. A time keeper or time chronometer."

"A time keeper," replied Graham affecting ignorance, though he knew a great deal more about the matter than his lordship of Scatterbrain; "yes, of course, every watch is a time keeper."

"Ah! yes, but you don't understand, this is a time measurer."

"Well, and is not every watch a time measurer?" pursued Graham, who now felt a sort of comical satisfaction at his successful billiard antagonist betraying his ignorance and endeavouring to explain his meaning so badly.

"Yes, yes, but this is for timing races, horse races, boat races, and so on, to a second me bhoy, to a half second."

"Oh! I understand now; there is some sort of special arrangement by which the exact time of the starting of a race, and the winners passing the post is marked down. I suppose its what used in older days to be called a "stop watch."

"Just so, only this is better than those old affairs, for this clever and injanious piece of machinery (Scatterbrain always doubled his brogue when he took a particular interest in any topic), don't stop at all, divil a bit of it, but goes on as well, aye and may be better than ever."

"But is it to be depended upon. Is it always correct?"

"By jabers, the big clock I went to see once at Greenwich observatory, is a fool to this elegant little article. Plaise the Lord, and I'm in the same mind and good health, I mean to go to the Derby race this year, for I'm dead fond of horse racing I must tell you."

"Oh! ha," thought Graham, making a note of this avowal. "This is something new to me, I must bear it in mind."

"Well, my Lord, go on."

"Well, then, I'll just make you a bet that I mark the time to a second of the start and the finish, so as to get exactly how long the winning horse was in doing the distance."

"Yes, yes, but will you back your watch to be absolutely correct?"

"I will. I'll bet you what you like, and if there's any dispute, we'll refer it to the judge or any one you plaze."

"But suppose other watches mark differently, not the same time as your's?"

"Then they are all wrong, that's what's the matter,"

replied Scatterbrain, with the air of a man who had triumphantly demolished his opponent in argument.

"Now do you know I want a watch of the kind myself to time boat races with, of which I'm very fond. Perhaps you'll tell me more about it, explain the way yours works, in fact, and what are its advantages?"

"Faith, and I will with the greatest pleasure."

And thereupon Lord Scatterbrain commenced to dilate on the wonders, beauties, and perfections of his chronograph watch.

Captain Maitland listened in a languid disdainful sort of way, and thought to himself—

"What a pair of asses these two men are. All this fuss about a watch."

Lord Scatterbrain now went on to describe all the beauties, and wonders of mechanism of his chronometer watch; which, with John Graham's questions, showing his great interest in the subject, occupied about a quarter of an hour.

"And who is the maker of this watch of yours? I really must get one myself," asked the crafty man of business, "is it French or English, or Swiss?"

"English my boy—English—nothing like English work for sound lasting mechanism."

"Where can I get a watch like this one of yours?" asked Graham.

"I got this at Benson's, I don't say you might not get one as good elsewhere, but I'm sure not better, and as for myself I am quite contented."

Graham, determined to put the Irish lord in a good humour while he was about it, took out his memorandum book.

"I shall certainly call and order one, as soon as I go back to town. What name and where did you say?"

"Benson, Ludgate Hill."

At that moment Jack Fulford opened the door, but instead of coming in, he stood with the handle in his hand.

"Hailo, Fulford!" cried Scatterbrain, "you've been gone five-and-forty minutes exactly by my watch."

Jack Fulford looked grave, and Graham saw at once that something serious was the matter.

"Scatterbrain," said the host, still standing at the door, "I wish to speak to you very particularly."

His lordship rose and left the room with Fulford.

"I wonder what the devil is up," thought Graham.

As for Captain Maitland, his thoughts took this shape—

"What a cad he is, this Lord Scatterbrain, he talks about watches like a jeweller's apprentice, a *role* which would just suit him, I fancy."

CHAPTER XL.

BAD NEWS FROM MYRTLE COTTAGE.

WHAT is it Mr. Leroy?" asked Scatterbrain excitedly, (and when he was at all excited the brogue always broke out), for he saw now by his friend's troubled expression that there was something the matter, "nothing serious I hope."

"Well, yes, rather—the fact, is we want you to give the deciding vote on a certain point, on which we are two and two. Lady Jane and I on one side, Florence and Lambton Leroy on the other. Yours is to be the casting vote, we have settled that."

"What is the point in dispute?"

"It is whether this young lady whom you have seen for the first time to-day, shall remain here at least for to-night, or be sent home in the brougham."

"Then that's soon settled," replied Scatterbrain, "let her stay by all means, the more the merrier, and especially of pretty girls say I."

"But my dear fellow just let me explain circumstances to you first. Come up in my dressing-room, there is a fire there, and in a few words I can make you understand the cause of our difficulty."

While Fulford is explaining, to Scatterbrain, we will do the same by the reader, and as the best means will narrate what occurred. After having heard what Leroy had to tell him, he sent for his cousin Florence to come to him in the library.

Leroy and he were alone there when Florence came to them looking rather surprised at being summoned to the somewhat sombre, cold room, for there was no fire.

"My dear Florence I have bad news."

"Bad news, Jack," cried, Florence, forgetting instantly her jealousy and slight anger as she heard the ominous words. "About what, about whom?"

"About that young lady—Miss Knight."

"Oh!" said Florence, coldly, and waited to hear more.

"It seems that her uncle has been involved in some chancery litigations. At all events he had been served with an order from the Court of Chancery. This order, either from obstinacy, carelessness, or perhaps ignorance he failed to comply with.

"Yes I understand, go on" said Florence, with even greater coldness. "Leroy," said Fulford turning to his friend, "you tell my cousin all that happened."

"Well, Miss Grey, as you are probably aware Captain Fulford left me with old Mr. Owen Knight, this young lady's uncle."

Leroy paused to arrange and collect his thoughts, having an unpleasant consciousness that Miss Florence Grey kept her eyes steadily fixed on his face all the while he was speaking.

In fact, it struck him that she distrusted him, doubted the truth of what he was saying, or about to say, in fact suspected that he and Jack Fulford had concocted a tale between them to get themselves out of a rather awkward scrape.

Under these circumstances it is not surprising that he should feel a little bit nervous and uneasy.

"Well," said Florence, "go on sir."

"Ah! hem. Mr. Knight brought out a bottle of old port, which we proceeded to discuss.

"After a bit, apparently warmed into good humour by

the wine, he began to talk, in fact we both talked, joked, and laughed, and by and bye were on excellent terms.

"The wine was excellent, and though, before dinner, I must confess that we finished the bottle, on which my host immediately produced another. Then he offered to relate to me a certain romance concerning the origin of his niece, as she was generally supposed—this young lady, Miss Susan Knight."

"Supposed! then she is not really his niece?" exclaimed Florence, lifting her eyebrows.

"No, only his adopted niece."

"Oh! his adopted niece," remarked Florence, and continued to throw into the tones of her voice, as only ladies can, a world of disdainful meaning."

"Yes, and a most romantic story it is. A story which reflects great honour on Mr. Owen Knight," said Leroy, warmly, for he thought he detected a latent sneer in Miss Grey's words.

"I shall be glad to listen to the romance."

"No, Florence, not now, let Mr. Leroy get on to the part of his narration, which concerns Miss Knight more immediately at the present moment."

Florence heard in silence.

"Well, shortly after Mr. Knight had finished his narrative, there came a knock at the door. The gentleman himself rose and opened it, and came in a few moments afterwards to the room where I was, looking flushed and excited.

"Close behind him there followed two men, whom I at once detected as being bailiff's, or myrmidons of the law of some description."

Leroy, pausing for a moment, caught a faint smile on the fair face of Florence Grey, which seemed to say, as plainly as a smile could.

"I don't dispute your authority on that point."

However, of this he took no notice, and went on.

"I saw that there was something wrong at once, by the manner and appearance of the men."

"I tell you, Mr. Knight spoke in an irritated, sharp manner, and evidently did not realise the whole of the truth.

“‘I have been worried enough about the business,’ he said; ‘go to Mr. Parker in the High Street in the town. He is my attorney, at least he has been doing some business for me, and that is enough. Go there and tell him I sent you, that will do. What the devil are you waiting for, why don’t you go?’

“‘We can’t go without you Mr. Knight,’ said one of the men.

“‘Very well, then, if you don’t choose to go to see my attorney without my accompanying you, go to the devil, that’s all I’ve got to say. I shall not come now I’ve got a friend with me.’

“The men looked at one another, and then the one who appeared to be the head man, produced a piece of paper, or parchment, ‘Mr. Knight, you know very well what we mean, although you pretend you don’t. This is our warrant.’

“‘Warrant! pretend I don’t. What do you mean you infernal scoundrels?’ cried old Knight, greatly excited.

“‘Just this, mister,’ replied the same man; ‘you are our prisoner, and must come along with us. Here is our warrant.’

“I here interposed.

“‘Mr. Knight’ I said, ‘allow me to look at the warrant for you, I am perhaps better acquainted with the English law than you. Pray be seated, I will deal with these gentlemen, and if they are wrong, we’ll very soon convince them of their mistake, and make them sing small.’

“The old gentleman sank into a chair, and I asked the men to let me see the warrant.

“From the first I had very little doubt they were right. They did not bounce or bully, but were quite quiet and civil about the matter, which is always a bad sign.

“The officer, for such he was, gave me the warrant to look over without any hesitation, and briefly scanning it, I at once saw that it was a warrant of committal for contempt of court, and the holders thereof, two sheriff officers were bound to deliver the body of the prisoner, (for such Mr. Owen Knight then was), to the gaoler of the court of Queen’s Bench.

"I endeavoured to explain the position to him as gently as I could.

" 'I have no doubt this unpleasant affair can very soon be arranged Mr. Knight,' I said, 'but at the present, these good men seem to be in the right—to have the law on their side.'

" 'Why what—what do you mean, you rascals, what do you want—to seize my goods?'

" 'No, mister, it ain't your goods, its you we want. You must come along with us sir. We've got our duty to perform and means to do it.'

"Slowly the truth seemed to dawn upon the old gentleman. I, noticing him keenly, saw a change come over his face for which I could not account.

" 'But how much money will settle it. I have money in the house—It is only a question of money, I suppose.'

" 'No, sir, that's not it at all, sir. This is a warrant of committal, and we're bound to execute it. So you must come along with us.'

"He looked at me in a pitiful, appealing manner.

"Poor old gentleman, I could not but feel sorry for him, he was so utterly helpless, and prostrated by this sudden shock.

" 'At present sir, it is as these men say. However, it will probably only involve a journey to London, and when you arrive there, I dare say you will soon be able to 'purge' the contempt and obtain your order of release from the court.'

" 'Oh! yes sir, there won't be no trouble about it, at all. You needn't go to prison you know, if you've got money—leastwise not to a regular prison, only to a sort of lock-up—what we call a spunging house.'

" 'Prison—lock-up!' ejaculated Mr. Knight; "Oh, dear, I shall die. I feel so ill.'

"I have before said that I noticed a singular change in his features, a deadly pallor, succeeded by a sudden flush, and this pallor again.

"His eyes, too, had a wild, frightened expression, and his arms moved spasmodically.

"There was a certain amount of distortion too, observ-

able in his face, his mouth turning in a strange manner.

"All at once after these last words, he rose to his feet, staggered a few paces—gave a deep groan, and fell heavily to the floor.

"Hastening to raise him, we found he was quite insensible, a sudden fit had overtaken him.

"I at once loosened his neckcloth, got him on the sofa, and then ran for the nearest doctor. I was fortunate in finding Dr. Walters at home, who at once accompanied me to the cottage.

"After a brief examination, and a few enquiries, he shook his head, and looking very grave, pronounced his opinion.

"It is a bad case—a very bad case. I have very little hope of his recovery. You see he is an old man, and this is a complicated affair. Apoplexy, combined with *hemiplegia*, that is, partial paralysis.'

"I made arrangement for nurses, got the patient to bed, and then, leaving him in charge of Doctor Walters, who promised he should receive every attention, hastened over here, to bring the news. It will be a terrible blow to Miss Knight—he is her only relation and friend in the world, I heard her say, and I know she loves the old man."

"A terrible blow, indeed," said Florence gravely, all her resentment and pettishness vanishing when she learned the serious nature of the catastrophe; "and yet it is necessary she should know."

"Of course!"

"And what of the two bailiffs?" asked Florence of Leroy.

"Oh! they have taken possession of the parlour, and were smoking long pipes, and drinking gin-and-water, when I left."

"Oh! the wretches, and the poor gentleman dying upstairs. And they really still hold him prisoner, and mean to remain."

"They will certainly remain until he either recovers sufficiently for them to take him to London, or dies."

"It would be terrible for the poor young lady, to go

over to her dying uncle, and find the house in possession of half-drunken fellows, as these probably are."

"Terrible indeed, and yet what is to be done," said Jack Fulford. "She ought to go, must go in fact; I am pretty sure that when she learns what has happened she will be eager to be going at once."

"Indeed, cousin Jack," said Florence, impetuously, "she ought not to go, *must not* go, *shall not* go. I say it, although you are master here. It would be cruel, absolutely barbarous to send this poor young thing over to such a scene. And besides, she could do no good, would only be in the way. No, she shall not go. Aunt and I will drive over to-morrow in the brougham, and see that Mr. Knight is well attended to, especially in the way of nursing. But as to Miss Susan Knight, she must stay here, and you and your friends must do the best you can to entertain, and cheer her up, while I and aunt are gone."

"I am still of the same opinion Florence," replied Fulford gravely; "I am sure she will insist upon going herself, when she hears the sad news; you must break it to her, Florence."

"Yes, poor young thing, I will—I and Jane Vavasour will take her upstairs to my dressing-room. By the way, what room shall I order to be got ready for her, Jack," asked Florence quietly, for she had made up her mind to have her own way, on this point.

"What do you think, Leroy," asked Fulford of his friend, "do you not agree with me, that the young lady ought to be with her uncle, now that he is so ill, probably dying?"

"No, I do not," replied Leroy, bluntly, "I agree entirely with Miss Grey, and think it would be both useless and cruel to send her back."

"Thank you, Mr. Leroy," said Florence, bestowing a little smile on him. "Now, Jack, you must give way."

But Jack Fulford was obstinate, and still adhered to his opinion.

"Well, you break the news to the young lady, and we will hear what Lady Jane, and Miss Shuttleworth say on the subject of her going, or staying here. By the

way, I should be very careful how I told her that these abominable bailiffs were in the house, Florence."

"Do not alarm yourself, Jack—as she is not going, but will stay here at all events for to-night, there is no necessity for her knowing at all; I shall not tell her that part of it, at all events."

Jack Fulford shrugged his shoulders, and they all three left for the drawing-room, where were Susan Knight, Lady Jane, and Miss Shuttleworth.

Florence proposed, and intended to take Miss Knight up to her own room, and there, with Lady Jane, break to her gently the sad news.

But things do not always turn out in this world exactly as we wish, even the best arranged plans are often defeated and in the most unlooked for manner.

L'homme propose, mais Dieu dispose.

CHAPTER XLI.

BREAKING SAD NEWS.

It requires a good deal of command over feature and manner for one person possessed of information, whether disastrous in its nature or pleasant, to enter a room where there are others not similarly informed, and to prevent the fact being discovered.

It is much more difficult for three people—as was the case with Leroy, Fulford, and Florence Grey—to enter a drawing-room all together where there were three other people totally ignorant of what had occurred, and one of them the person most concerned.

All tried to appear at their ease, and probably the most unsuccessful was Jack Fulford.

Lady Jane Vavasour was the first to perceive this embarrassment, which all felt more or less, and at once decided that something was wrong.

As to Susie Knight, she, too, had a vague consciousness that something had occurred, but had not the slightest idea as to its nature.

Presently, looking up suddenly, she caught Florence Grey in the act of looking earnestly at her with a sorrowful, pitying expression.

Miss Grey was talking to Lady Jane at the time, and Susie Knight could not possibly avoid the conclusion that it was about herself.

Florence Grey coloured up, looked surprised, and turned her face away, and Lady Jane also did the same.

"Whatever can be the matter," thought poor little Susie, "I hope I have done nothing wrong."

Up to that time she had been in excellent spirits and enjoyed the novelty of finding herself in such grand company, now that most of the shyness she at first felt had worn off.

"Speak to her now, Florence, at once," said Lady Jane, hastily, "she must have seen we were talking about her."

"Come with me, Jane," said Florence, advancing towards Miss Knight, sorely put about, and not at all liking the unpleasant task before her.

Susie Knight saw the two young ladies approaching her, and seemed to know by intuition that something terrible was coming.

She looked at them with a startled, frightened expression, her large eyes dilating, her lips apart.

"Miss Knight," said Florence, gently, "will you come with me to my dressing-room, I have something to say to you."

Susie rose hastily, and stood before them with clasped hands and pale face.

"Ah," she said, "you have something to say to me. It is bad news. Something has happened! Is it about my uncle! He is angry with me—is that it?"

Florence shook her head.

"No, my dear, it is not that."

"But it is about my uncle. Something has happened to him—I know—I am sure of it. Oh, tell me at once. Do let me know the worst."

Her voice rose to a higher pitch as she spoke, and she looked wild and distraught.

"My dear Miss Knight, come with me to my room, we can talk better there."

"No, no!" almost shrieked the young girl, "tell me at once. I can see by your look something has happened. Oh! for heaven's sake tell me."

Vainly Florence sought to get her away from the drawing-room, for she foresaw, a new, a wild burst of grief on the part of the warm-hearted, impulsive girl.

Susie Knight threw herself on an ottoman and half hid her face in the pillow.

"Tell me now; if you have any pity let me know the worst. He has had an accident, perhaps, in driving over to fetch me. He is dead—I know he is dead! Oh, dear! oh, dear!"

"You had better tell her at once, Florence," said Fulford, gravely.

Florence seated herself on the couch beside the young lady and took her hands in her own. "Miss Knight—Susan, dear, if I may call you so—calm yourself and I will speak to you."

At those gentle words of womanly sympathy, Susie Knight looked up, and gazed in the face of Florence.

She saw there gentleness, pity, tenderness, and at once became calm.

Now that a great sorrow was about to fall on the fair being whose hands she held—who gazed trustingly in her face—at the sight of Susie Knight's pale frightened face, at the thought of her grief at the terrible news she had to tell her (for Leroy distinctly said that the doctor gave almost no hope of recovery), every trace of jealous anger and suspicion, vanished from the mind of Florence Grey.

"What is it, Miss Grey?" gasped Susie, "do tell me the worst—the very worst."

The situation was now painful in the extreme.

A dead silence reigned in the drawing-room, whilst Florence paused for a few moments to shape the words in which she should convey the truth to Susie Knight.

"Your uncle has been taken very ill."

"Ah! then, he is not dead?"

"Not dead," replied Florence, very gravely.

And in her tone and manner Susie read that he was dangerously ill—worse, dying.

"Ah! I know what you mean!" she cried, her voice rising to a shrill pitch; "he is dying—dying—speak. Is it not so?"

And she clutched Florence's hands with terrible energy, and gazed in her face with a wild, almost maniacal stare.

"I fear it is so," replied Florence, slowly and sorrowfully; for she thought it best, now that she had commenced to let her know the worst.

"My dear, kind uncle dying—dying—dying."

Then she gave vent to a shriek, and throwing herself on the ottoman gave vent to a burst of wild hysterical weeping, truly Irish in its character.

This continued for some time, all standing around, awe-stricken and silent at the sight of the poor girl's frantic grief.

Presently she gave a gasp and was silent.

"She has fainted," said Florence, and seating herself beside her on the couch, drew her head over and laid it tenderly on her shoulder.

"Jane, dear, your smelling salts—no, don't ring, we can do better than the servants."

Lady Jane gave her her vinaigrette, and slowly Susan Knight revived.

Then there succeeded a more quiet and healthful flow of tears, the young lady clinging to Florence Grey as to a mother or elder sister.

"Poor little thing," said Florence, tenderly, "my heart bleeds for her."

Presently she grew quite calm and begged Florence to tell her all about it.

This the latter did, softening it down as much as possible, and entirely omitting all mention of the bailiffs.

"I must go to him at once, dear Miss Grey. You will send me over there, sir, will you not?" she added, turning to Jack Fulford.

"Certainly, if you wish it," he replied.

"Call me Florence, dear," said that young lady. "We are friends now, and will always be friends, will we not?"

"Yes, if you will let me," said Susie, laying her head on her shoulder again.

"But as to your going over to your uncle at once, that is out of the question. Captain Fulford will at once despatch a mounted groom to inquire as to how your uncle is—will you not, cousin?"

"Certainly," replied Fulford, ringing the bell, "it was unpardonable stupidity on my part not to have done so at once.

"However, a man shall be off on horseback in ten minutes' time, and while I think of it I will send a note to Doctor Robertson, our own physician, and certainly the most eminent and skilful man for many miles round."

He seated himself at a writing table, and hastily scribbled a note.

"You are very kind sir," said Susie Knight, bestowing on him a grateful look.

"Now my dear Susie, (I shall call you Susie and you must call me Florence), you must leave yourself in our hands."

Susie was able to smile faintly through her tears, and Florence went on.

"At present it is out of the question our going over to Lambton Buzzard—surely you would not insist on seeing your uncle if the doctors said it would do him harm."

"Oh! no," cried Susie, "but then, you know, I would be in the house, I might be of use you see, and it looks so unkind and undutiful to be away, as if I had deserted him in his need."

And again the tears flowed.

"No, my dear Susie, you would only be in the way. Just think now, there are nurses and doctors to accommodate, for depend upon it Dr. Robertson will not leave him alone night or day till a change takes place; he or his assistant will be always there. Your presence would be only embarrassing and do harm. You must allow us

to decide this matter for you," said Jack Fulford meaningly

She understood and bowed her head.

"While we think it best for you to stay, a mounted messenger shall go several times a day to bring news. If, when your uncle regains consciousness, he expresses a wish to see you, then you shall go at once. Come now, be a good girl and leave it with me."

"Oh! you are so kind, Florence," replied the young girl, and again she pillowed her head on Miss Grey's shoulder, "and you are much wiser than I am, so *I can't* do wrong in trusting to you—doing as you tell me."

Florence's eyes filled with tears.

"To think that even I should have harboured an uncharitable or unkind thought against this little angel, tender-hearted, and innocent as a dove," she said to herself.

"Come with me Susie, dear," she said, "I will take you to your room. You shall go to bed now, and I will sit with you till you are asleep."

Susie Knight rewarded her with a look all love and gratitude, and Florence then led her away, after bidding good night to all.

CHAPTER XLII.

NEVER CONTRADICT A WOMAN.

"WELL, this is a sad affair," said Fulford, "a dismal business. I suppose there is little hope of the old gentleman getting over it, Leroy?"

"I think none, not altogether from the doctor's words, for they never commit themselves so far as to say there is no hope, but from his manner—"

"Well, now then the question is, as to whether Miss Knight ought to stay or go. You know my opinion

Leroy, and you also Scatterbrain, and we know Florence's. Now what say you, Lady Jane? do you think, under the circumstances, that Miss Knight ought to remain here or go over to her uncle to-morrow morning. It's too late to think of it to-night; Florence, wilful as she is, has carried things with a high hand, and taken her off to bed."

"What is your opinion, Lord Scatterbrain?" said Lady Jane, turning to him, and, in Irish fashion, answering one question by asking another.

"No, that is not fair. It is possible you may have to give the casting vote, Scatterbrain, as we may be two and two; on your honour I charge you not to answer."

"Lady Jane," said Scatterbrain, "I'm forbid to answer you."

"Oh! very well," said Lady Jane, affecting ill-humour, "then I will give my opinion. *I think she ought to go.*"

"That coincides with mine, Lady Jane, but my cousin Florence and Leroy think differently. So with you, Lord Scatterbrain, rests the casting vote."

"Lord Scatterbrain will vote with me, I'm sure," said Lady Jane, bestowing a bright glance on him.

It was a cruel thing on Lady Jane's part, to place her admirer in such a position, for she knew right well what would be Scatterbrain's opinion on the matter, warm-hearted Irish man as he was.

"On my faith and honour Lady Jane," he said, "I'm bound to go dead against you this time."

"Oh! Lord Scatterbrain," said Lady Jane, casting on him a reproachful glance. "I did not think you would side against me."

"What is your deliberate verdict, Scatterbrain. Do you agree with Lady Jane and myself, or do you give in favour of my cousin Florence and Leroy?"

"I say it would be a sin and a shame to send the poor young creature home to a house of illness, soon likely enough to be a house of mourning, and the bailiffs there too—on my life and soul Lady Jane, but you must be as hard hearted as you are beautiful, and you too, Captain Fulford, it's forgetting your hospitality and good manners you are entirely."

"Well, you see, Scatterbrain, I am awkwardly placed," said Fulford, drawing him on one side, while Lady Jane talked with Leroy. "It was rather a bold thing bringing the young lady over as I did, and introducing her off-hand to my cousin and Lady Jaue. I could see that neither of them liked it. Florence is proud and quick tempered, and I should be very sorry to offend her; we should have a serious quarrel. Now I know what women are, if I were to show myself anxious for the young lady to stay, Florence, I know, would think I had some motive for it beyond the ostensible one. I would not for the world send the poor girl back, but you see, by my plan, I have disarmed Florence's hostility and suspicion, and while in reality things are managed just as I wished, she flatters herself she has had it all her own way."

"By St. Patrick," said Scatterbrain, laughing; "but it's yourself that's an artful, long-headed old fox."

"My dear boy," replied Fulford, "bear in mind what I am going to tell you. It is the result of experienced observation; never contradict a woman. If you behave with tact, you can always have your own way, but to do so you must let her suppose that she is having her way, that she is leading you, not *vice versa*; but attempt to *drive* a woman, and nine times out of ten you come to grief, and even if you succeed it is an unsatisfactory victory, followed by sulkiness, ill-temper and the never-forgotten soreness of defeat. In dealing with women you must not attempt to reason with them, must not even treat them as reasoning beings. Look upon them as capricious and passionate animals, appeal to their feelings, soothe and caress a woman into good behaviour as you would a hot-tempered fractious horse or dog."

"On my life and soul, I think you'd get into hot water if Lady Jane were to hear your opinion of the fair sex in general."

"That's quite possible; but I shall be particularly careful that neither she nor Florence hear my theory, as to the proper management of women."

"Just look here my boy," said Scatterbrain, confidentially, "now you be careful, or maybe one of these same

women that you boast of being able to lead so easily by your artfulness, will lead you the devil's own dance yet. There's many a better man than you, has made a fool of himself for a pretty woman, or has let her make a fool of him."

"Oh! never fear me," cried Fulford, laughing, "I am full against all that sort of thing."

"Ah! me bhoy, there's many a fine fellow has thought and said the same, and lived to find out his mistake."

At this moment Mr. Graham, and Captain Maitland, entered the drawing-room, tired of their long, and by no means lively *tête à tête*.

"I must ask your pardon, Captain Maitland, and yours too Mr. Graham, for absenting myself from the dining-room, my excuse is, that I was compelled to attend to a most painful affair, at once."

"Indeed," said Mr. Graham, who felt sure all along that something was the matter, and was now very curious to know what had occurred, "nothing serious, I hope?"

"Well yes, I am afraid so," replied Fulford, and then, seeing that Graham looked for some explanation, added—

"The uncle of the young lady who dined with us, Miss Knight, has been taken seriously ill."

"Indeed, I am extremely sorry to hear of it," replied Graham, and then, he as, looking round the room, saw that Susie was not present, "I presume she has hastened home," he asked.

"No—for the present we think it better she should remain here. There are other complications, unfortunately. But your friend Leroy," added Jack Fulford abruptly, as if he were trying to get rid of an unpleasant subject, "will tell you all about it. He was there when the old gentleman was seized with a fit, and knows more about it than I do."

And then Fulford took Lord Scatterbrain's arm, and drew him on one side.

Leroy thus referred to, of course was compelled to give Graham a full history of all he knew of the affair.

The first and dominant thought in the mind of the man of business when he learned that old Mr. Knight

would probably die, and that he was in the custody of bailiffs, was this—

“Now I can use this to my own advantage.”

His manner had now undergone a complete change.

He had seen the folly of his previous conduct, in allowing his naturally savage temper to get the better of his judgment, and firmly resolved that he would not again so commit himself.

Meanwhile he set himself to atone, as far as possible, for his mistake.

To Leroy he was as amiable as possible and was careful not to say a word on the subject of their conversation before dinner.

Presently Florence Grey entered, and announced that Susie Knight had fallen asleep.

There was much constraint and coldness about the party in the drawing-room, a cold chill, socially speaking, settled on all.

So Florence, in order as far as possible, to modify this general feeling of embarrassment, proposed a whist party.

Lady Jane declared herself willing to make one, as did Lord Scatterbrain, and Mr. Graham.

Scatterbrain and Lady Jane were partners. Greatly to the delight of the Irishman, the lady was particularly careful, and they won all before them, for Graham played with the utmost carelessness, trumping his partner's tricks, and committing other errors, which would have driven any one whose heart was in the game, mad—or at least into a terribly bad temper.

The busy brain of the man of business was at work on something he thought of more importance than hearts, spades, diamonds and clubs.

He played in a listless abstracted way, not flattering to the others.

Presently Florence, who herself was not much interested in the game, had to rebuke him sharply for a gross blunder he had made.

All at once he seemed to wake himself up, and played with as much apparent interest, care and skill as he had previously badly and listlessly.

"Lady Jane," he said, briskly, "we shall win the game. I shall score tricks, honours, and the rub. I will bet you a box of Jouvin's gloves, to a single pair."

The bet was taken, and Graham, as he had predicted, won.

"Yes," he said to himself as they all rose from the table, "I shall win the game. The important game of life, I am playing with men and women for, not the game with cards. I shall win. I see it all clear before me now. I must be off to London in the morning. Susie Knight, by to-morrow evening I will have established a hold on your affections if I can, at all events I shall have enlisted your gratitude in my favour."

CHAPTER XLIII.

PRIVATE AND CONFIDENTIAL.

THAT night, before going to bed, Jack Fulford and Leroy smoked a cigar together over the fire, in the former's dressing-room.

In the delightful ease and comfort of dressing-gown and slippers, seated each in a great old-fashioned dimity-covered arm chair, these two old friends talked as old friends will over old times, old associations and old acquaintances."

"Do you know, Jack," said Leroy, throwing away his cigar and lighting another one. "I want to talk to you seriously, I have been wanting to do so for some time, but felt delicate about the matter, because you see it is not altogether concerning myself."

"Speak out, old boy, open your heart to me, and I'll do the very best I can for you, both as regards advice and in every other way."

"I know you will Jack, so I'll just blurt it all out."

"Blaze away, help yourself to a glass of punch first."

Leroy did so and went on.

"Well, you know I came down here on business."

"Yes, and had the impudence to think of putting up at an inn, with my place only a short drive away."

"I came down on business with Mr. Graham, who, as you know, is a man of business, a shrewd money-making man."

Fulford nodded and said—"Yes, I can quite understand that."

"Well, he is a very decent sort of fellow in his way, and I am under obligations to him."

"Pecuniary?"

"Yes," replied Leroy, colouringly slightly.

"Ah! go on old boy, I'll talk to you when you've finished."

"Well, you see he looks at everything in a cold matter of-fact, business manner; you must understand, I have nothing whatever to say against him, I can't accuse him of acting in any respect the Shylock towards me."

Leroy hesitated, scarcely knowing how to broach the doubly delicate subject he had in his thoughts.

"Go on, man, don't be afraid to speak, am I not an old friend, either speak right out or not at all. No half confidences."

Thus urged, Leroy replied, "Well I will. It amounts to this, he made a sort of proposal to me the other day, and again to-night. And yet not exactly a proposal, in his calm business-like way, he wanted to make a bargain, to impose certain conditions in fact—"

"Well, what was the nature of the proposed bargain; pecuniary?"

"No, at least only collaterally so. I should not have minded if it had been altogether about money."

Leroy paused for a moment or two, and then, seeming to pluck up resolution, plunged at once *in medias res*."

"You know that I and Graham made the acquaintance of this young lady, Susan Knight, in the train."

"Yes, you told me so."

"Well, the fact is, Graham is wonderfully taken with her."

"Whew? I begin to see," exclaimed Jack Fulford, "d—m his impudence. What the devil does he mean?"

He shan't prosecute any of his designs against her in my house, that I will answer for."

"I don't think you clearly understand me," said Leroy hastily. "Graham looks upon her in a commercial point of view. She has a magnificent voice, and he sees his way to bring her out at the opera, greatly to his own profit."

And, Leroy added, after a moment or two, "Of course it would be greatly to the girl's advantage also, to have a man of the world to make her engagements, and attend to all business matters for her."

"There's something in that, and yet it is possible to pay too high a price for the advantage gained. You think that his views on Susie Knight are purely of a business character?" asked Fulford, looking hard at Leroy.

Now, the latter, to tell the truth, had a vague idea, a sort of intuitive suspicion, that John Graham was not only attracted by the prospect of large profits to be made through Susie Knight, but was also smitten by the beauty, grace, and innocence of the young lady.

However, he had not the least tangible ground for any such thought, so was able to reply in good faith—

"I have not the slightest reason to think Graham has any other motive, than to introduce to the public and bring out under his auspices, a new singer of wonderful promise."

"I am glad of it," said Fulford briefly.

"I know," said Leroy, explanatorily, that Graham has much taste in musical matters, and for a long time he has had a sort of hankering after a big theatrical speculation.

"He has spoken to me on the subject, many times before ever he saw or dreamed of Susie Knight."

"So much the better. Do you know though, Leroy, old fellow, that I have fancied more than once that Graham had his eye on that little girl. He has been studiously cautious, even reserved, in his behaviour to her, but once or twice I caught his eyes resting on her face with a curious, indefinable expression, as though his thoughts were something like this—'pretty little thing, you are for me, I must spread my net for you', but, headed, laughing,

I dare say it was only my fancy, and that he was merely calculating as he looked in her fair face, how many hundreds or thousands of pounds he could make out of her."

"Most likely," said Leroy, who, now that he had broken the ice, went on more at his ease.

"Well, the fact is, Graham wants the young lady altogether to himself."

"D—m his impudence," again ejaculated Jack Fulford.

"Exactly, that's just what I thought. In his cold-blooded, business way, he explained to me his views, told me he saw his way to make a great deal of money out of the young lady, and said that he did not want her head turned by flattery, soft speeches, and so on, on the part of myself or any one else. He tried to make me promise that I would not poach on what he seemed to consider his preserves. Put it as a personal affair; reminded me that I was under obligations to him, and that he was going to arrange a little affair of money for me, which would make me still further in his debt, and, in fact, urged on me that one good turn deserves another."

"Well, all I can say is, he has the most consummate impudence, this John Graham, of any man I ever heard of. What could be his reason for wanting you to promise all this. Had he an idea that you were in love with the girl, and by gaining her affections, or perhaps even by marrying her, would interpose a shield between himself and her."

"I can hardly say for certain, but you know Jack, Graham is not what is called a taking man with ladies on first acquaintance. He is not a young man, must be close on to forty, and I say it without any vanity, I made better progress in the young lady's good graces than he did; in fact, I was able to amuse her or make her laugh, and small talk and all that sort of thing is quite out of his line. And now I've told you all about it. What is your opinion?"

"U'm—" said Jack Fulford, stroking his moustache, "I think I can see deeper into this well than you can, I must say your friend's conduct seems very much as if

dictated by jealousy—not without the business element doubtless.”

“Well, what do you advise?”

“You say that you are under obligations to him.”

“Yes.”

“Owe him money, in fact?”

“Yes, but he holds security.”

“And he is about to advance you more, to meet some pressing demands.”

“Yes, that is it exactly, but not without security.”

“Well, now, Lambton Leroy, old fellow, take my pocket book, and just jot down how much will clear you with him altogether, how much you owe him, principal and interest.”

Leroy did this in a very short time, for the account was by no means complicated.

He handed it to Jack Fulford.

“And now put down the sum you are going to borrow of him, and the security.”

This Leroy also did, Fulford took it, looked over it, added up the two sums, and said—

“That’s all right, we will now arrange that for you my boy, I will find you the money to pay off Graham and take the security he holds. I shall charge you only four per cent. and I don’t suppose he is so moderate as that.”

“No, indeed.”

“Well, that I don’t blame him for, with him it is a matter of business, with me its friendship. And now about what you want to borrow—I will lend you the money, more, half as much again, so as to leave you a margin, on the same security he would take, and I will charge you as before, four per cent.”

“My dear old boy,” cried Leroy, grasping his friend’s hand, “you are too kind, too generous.”

“Nonsense,” said Fulford, “I have some money lying idle and may just as well have four per cent. from you as any one else, as I could not get more on mortgage. So that’s settled. To-morrow we’ll drive over to Lambton Buzzard, see my lawyer, and conclude the thing at once.” And so it was arranged.

CHAPTER XLIV.

MR. GRAHAM HAS BUSINESS TO TRANSACT.

LEROY woke next morning much more at his ease than he had been for days.

It was a great relief to feel himself, as it were, a free man, and have it in his power to defy John Graham with impunity, if need should arise.

Not that he was at all disposed to do so. He felt, on the other hand, charitably disposed towards the latter; in fact, was on good terms with himself and everybody else.

"I must not be too hard on Graham," he thought to himself. "He looks upon things from a different *stand-point*, as the Germans say, from that from which we do. What we should consider sharp practice—almost dishonourable even—he would look upon as a matter of legitimate business. I dare say he'll be annoyed when he learns I can do without him.

"However, I'll let him down gently—give him a good round sum for his trouble, and so forth."

Thus thinking, Leroy descended to the drawing-room, where he found all the company assembled.

The letters had just arrived, and John Graham, after opening one or two of his, said, "Leroy, I find I must run up to London for a day. My business there will only occupy me a few hours, and when I've got through it I'll come down again and we can attend to that matter between us."

"I was going to talk to you on that very subject," said Leroy.

"Well, you must postpone it now. I shall try and catch the half past ten express from Lambton Buzzard. It is now a quarter past nine."

"Oh, you can do that easily," said Fulford, "and

should you miss it, there is another, a fast train, at ten minutes past eleven. When shall we expect you again?"

"To-night, I hope I shall be back. I am very prompt in business matters—make it a principle not to waste time and words."

"Quite right, sir. Shall I order the dog-cart for you?"

"Well, I was thinking," replied Graham, "that as I shall not take any luggage I might ride over to the station on horseback, leave the nag at the Railway Hotel, and ride back again at night."

"Just as you like," replied Fulford. "Everything in my stall is, of course, at your service."

"Many thanks, Captain Fulford, for your profuse hospitality. I will have a horse round, if you please."

In less than a quarter of an hour Graham was in the saddle, and on the road to Lambton Buzzard at a hard trot.

"That friend of yours does not let the grass grow under his feet. He seems a man of prompt action," remarked Fulford to Leroy.

"He is the most energetic business man I ever knew in my life. I assure you he is wonderful in that way. He will get through as much in a day as some men will in a month. He is not long in making up his mind, and when he has done so is still more rapid in action."

"Nothing like it," remarked Fulford, and then the subject dropped.

Susan Knight was present, looking pale—a little sad and anxious—but quite composed.

She was seated beside Florence Grey, to whom she seemed to cling and look up to for advice and support as to an elder sister.

The two were now great friends, and Florence declared to herself that Susie was the sweetest little darling she had ever met in her life.

A mounted messenger had been despatched early in the morning to inquire as to Mr. Owen Knight's state, and had just returned with the news that he was much the same, if anything a little better.

Florence, however, was not so cruelly kind as to buoy

Susie up with false hopes, but explained to her clearly that at her uncle's age the probability of his recovering from a severe attack was small, and so gradually put her into a calm and resigned state of mind—hoping for the best, yet prepared for the worst.

"And you see, Susie, dear, you will not be alone in the world, even should you lose your dear uncle. You will always find me a sincere friend."

Susie thanked her with a look and a pressure of the hand, which spoke more than words could.

Immediately after breakfast, Fulford said :—

"And now, ladies and gentlemen, about the arrangements for the day. As for myself, I and Mr. Leroy have some business to see to at Lambton Buzzard. We shall start in about half an hour with the doctor. What do you and Captain Maitland propose, Lady Jane?"

"Oh, we must return home. Uncle would be uneasy if he were to go home from London and find me away. He is so dreadfully fidgetty."

"But you will stay for lunch, of course," said Florence.

"Well, yes. I propose we start about three o'clock. Will that suit you, Captain Maitland?"

"I am at the orders of Lady Jane Vavasour," replied the Captain, bowing. "Her most humble and devoted servant."

"That is all right, then. As for you, Scatterbrain, we must leave you to assist Captain Maitland in esquireing the ladies."

"Only too much honoured, I am sure."

Shortly afterwards Fulford and Leroy started in the dogcart, promising to be home by lunch time, if possible.

Jack Fulford soon finished his business with Leroy, gave instructions to his lawyer to prepare the necessary documents, and made him promise to have everything in readiness the next afternoon.

This done, Fulford produced the title deeds of the little cottage where Susan Knight and her uncle lived.

"You will prepare a deed of assignment, absolute, unconditional, of this little property to Miss Susan Knight," he said, "and I want it at once—within a

couple of hours. It need only be a short deed, you know, and you have plenty of clerks who have not half enough to do, so you can get it ready if you like." The lawyer was aghast; he did not understand such a prompt and straight-forward way of doing business.

"But, my dear sir," he pleaded, "I must draw an abstract of the title and have it proved."

"D—n the abstract—just draw up a brief deed of assignment, so that I can hand it over to the young lady. If you won't, some one else will, I dare say."

Now Captain Fulford was far too rich and important a client for the lawyer to lose, so he assented, not very well pleased, however, at this off-hand way of doing business.

"But the consideration, my dear sir—what is the consideration?" he cried, stopping Fulford, just as he was hurrying away.

"Oh, the consideration? None at all, a free gift."

"But that is impossible—the law does not recognize such a thing in the transfer of real property. There must be some consideration to put in the deed of assignment."

"Oh, all right," said Fulford, "say fifteen hundred pounds. Come along, Leroy, let's get out of this spider's web."

Then, when they got outside, he added, laughing—

"I soon settled the difficulty about the consideration."

"But Miss Knight hasn't got fifteen hundred pounds," said Leroy, a little puzzled.

"Oh, we'll make that right very easily, and I'll tell you how."

"How?"

"You must lend it to her, and then she can pay me, and I can pay you again. Do you see?"

"But I haven't got fifteen hundred pounds."

"Well, then I'll lend the sum," said Fulford.

Leroy laughed.

"Well, if that is not a nice way of defeating the law I don't know what is."

CHAPTER XLV

JACK AND SUSIE.

By three o'clock in the afternoon Fulford had completed his business in Lambton Buzzard.

The assignment of Myrtle Cottage to Susie Knight was duly drawn out and witnessed by Leroy.

Also, Fulford had given directions for deeds and the necessary papers to be prepared, that Leroy might save himself from liability to John Graham, his friend putting himself in the place of the latter.

"In the meanwhile I had better pay in a thousand to the bank here in your name? That will suffice for present necessities? These lawyers are sure to be a day or two about it?"

"Really old boy you are too good," said Leroy, "and I am most grateful."

"Oh! nonsense," said Fulford, as he pulled up at the door of the bank, "I am going to take ample security for what I lend you, so that really I see no cause for gratitude. On my own part, I may as well invest my money in that way as any other."

As they drove home together to Woodford Grange, Leroy felt an immense sense of relief. He was no longer in the power of John Graham, and could now, if the necessity arose, defy him without any subsequent inconvenience to himself.

He had forgotten his ill temper on being chaffed by Fulford about Susie Knight, and when they arrived at Woodford Grange he was in excellent humour with himself, and all the world beside.

Lady Jane Vavasour, and Captain Maitland had

taken their departure, Lord Scatterbrain being left to entertain the ladies, Florence Grey and Miss Knight.

Florence and his lordship were in the billiard-room, the latter giving the lady twenty points out of fifty, at which odds he sustained well deserved defeat, for Florence played an excellent game for a lady, the fact of Scatterbrain being compelled to use the rest, putting them on more of an equality.

As for Susie Knight, she expressed a wish to be quiet, and Florence left her in the drawing-room, thinking that under the circumstances the little girl would be more happy alone with her thoughts, and would become used to Woodford Grange, where as yet all was strange to her.

Leroy and his friend went to the billiard-room, and Fulford learning that Miss Knight was calmed, took an early opportunity of making his escape, and joined his young lady visitor who was sitting disconsolately by the window, listlessly turning over a volume of the *Art Journal*.

She rose when Fulford entered, and greeted him with a sad smile.

"Have you any good news for me, sir? Is my uncle better?"

He shook his head and replied, gravely.

"He is much about the same, neither better nor worse. Pray be seated, Miss Knight, and I will talk to you, and explain some matters with which it is necessary you should be acquainted."

He led her to an ottoman and seated himself by her side.

"My dear young lady," he said, taking her hand in a fatherly, or rather brotherly, sort of way, and looking her steadfastly in the face, "I will not seek to deceive you, will not disguise the truth and give you false hopes."

"You think, then, my uncle will not recover."

"Frankly, I do not think he will. Such, I know, is the opinion of the medical gentlemen who are attending him. Death sooner or later is the lot of us all. He has attained a ripe old age, and it is not to be expected that he can survive so serious an attack as this."

"And what is the nature of his illness?"

"Apoplexy, complicated with hemiplegia."

"And what is that? I do not understand those long learned words."

"Partial paralysis—the two together are more than we can *hope* even that he will survive."

Susie Knight's tears flowed now. She wept gently, and did not give way to a passionate burst of grief.

Fulford had sense enough to refrain from endeavouring to console her as some well-meaning, but clumsy, men would have done. He rightly judged that tears would relieve her, and waited for a short time before saying more.

Presently Susie Knight dried her eyes.

"You will think me very silly, Mr. Fulford, but indeed I cannot help it. It is hard to lose one's only friend in the wide world, and dear uncle has been so kind to me; he has more than filled the place of father and mother to me, who am only his niece by adoption."

"Do not say the only friend in the wide world, Miss Knight. I trust, if it should be the will of Providence that you are to lose your uncle, that you will permit myself and my cousin Florence to do all in our power to supply his place."

"Ah! yes; you are very, very kind, and so is dear Florence—Miss Grey I mean—I beg pardon."

"No, no; do nothing of the kind," said Fulford, "call her Florence. She, I am sure, will be glad to be your friend; and as to me, I hope you won't think of standing upon ceremony. You must not call me Captain Fulford any more."

"And what am I to call you then?" she asked, artlessly.

"Oh! the same as Florence does, Jack?"

Susie Knight laughed through her tears, at the absurd thought of calling a gentleman "Jack," whom she had seen, for the first time in her life, only on the previous day.

"And now we will talk about business, Miss Knight, with your permission."

"With my permission!" replied the young lady, "and

you call me, Miss Knight! and, almost in the same breath, tell me to call you 'Jack!'"

"How would you wish me to address you? What shall I call you?" asked Fulford.

She thought for a moment, and then replied with charming *naïveté*.

"Uncle calls me Susie."

Fulford laughed, and she smiled.

"Well, then," he said, "I, too, will call you Susie, on one condition.

"And what is that?"

"That you call me Jack."

"Very well."

"Susie, we will shake hands on the compact," said Fulford.

Remember, though, your part of it. You must call me Jack.

"Yes, Jack," said Susie Knight, laughing. "It seems so strange to me. We had a magpie once called Jack. But he was a bad bird, and used dreadful language. I don't know who could have taught it to him. I'm sure it was not uncle. He used to swear, Captain Fulford, and ——"

"Ah!" interrupted the gentleman, "you have broken your compact. You said *Captain Fulford!*"

"I apologise."

"That is not sufficient. You must also retract and make reparation, Susie."

"What am I to do? What do you require me to say?"

"Say I am very sorry, *Jack*, and it shall not occur again."

"I am very sorry, Jack, and it shall not occur again."

"A bargain, Susie."

He took her hand, which was temptingly within reach.

But neither of them observed the drawing-room door open, and shortly close again.

It was Florence Grey.

CHAPTER XLVI.

SUSIE BECOMES A LANDOWNER.

"AND now, Susie," said Fulford, "I have something else to say to you—about business matters."

"Oh! dear, I am sure I shall not understand."

"This is very simple—it is about Myrtle Cottage. You know I promised that I would arrange so that you should not have to leave."

"It was very kind of you indeed, Captain Fulford."

"Well, I have arranged it, and I shall now proceed to tell you how."

He rose, and placing a small round table in front of them, laid thereon the papers which the lawyer had prepared for the assignment of Myrtle Cottage.

"Now here is the assignment. You must now give me fifteen hundred pounds, and I will give you a receipt."

Susie Knight opened her dark eyes and looked at him.

"Fifteen hundred pounds, Captain Ful—"

"Susie!" cried Jack, holding up his finger in warning.

"Well, Jack," then she said, smiling, "I have not fifteen hundred pounds, and I don't think I ever possessed so many pence."

"Mr. Leroy will lend you the money. In fact, here it is ——"

Jack Fulford took from an envelope a cheque, signed "L. Leroy," for fifteen hundred pounds. This he had obtained from his friend, of course with the understanding that he would pay in the money to the account of Leroy to meet it.

"But," said Susie, "how can and why does Mr. Leroy wish to lend me fifteen hundred pounds? I have no money to pay him."

"Oh! that is nothing," replied Fulford. "Don't you see, he has the money to invest, and he will get the interest."

"I hardly understand," said Susie Knight, in a puzzled sort of manner. "I have neither fifteen hundred pounds to repay him, nor have I any money even for interest."

"Ah! you don't understand. The interest on fifteen hundred pounds at three per cent. will be forty-five pounds per annum."

"Well, but Captain Ful—, Jack, I mean, I have not got forty-five pounds a year."

"But you will make lots of money by your profession."

"Perhaps I may. I hope so," said Susie Knight, seriously; "but at present I have no money, and I would not borrow without the certainty of being able to pay back."

"My dear Susie, I will explain to you. Even though you have no money and never earn any, you can easily pay the interest."

"How is that possible?" asked Susie.

"You know at the back of the cottage there is a meadow, a piece of arable land, paddock, and orchard."

"Yes, but we have never had those."

"Ah! that is just it," replied Fulford with an air of triumph. "You will have them now, they are all in the assignment, fee simple as the lawyers say, to you, your heirs, assigns, and executors for ever."

"Oh! dear, Captain—Jack, I mean—I do not understand all those legal phrases. You are puzzling me more and more."

"I will now make you understand," pursued Fulford; "about this meadow, paddock, and orchard, you know them?"

"Yes, of course."

"Well, from the meadow and paddock alone you can realise more than enough money to pay the interest on the fifteen hundred pounds."

"I really cannot see it. How is that possible? I cannot dig and plough the land, and I'm sure there's

not a gold mine there, or it would be worth a greal deal more."

"No, but you can nevertheless obtain fifty pounds a year upon the paddock and meadow, and that is five pounds more than the interest. So you see, now, you will have a little property of your own—a frechold, and by letting the paddock and meadow, which you don't require, clear five pounds. Besides that, the fruit in the orchard will bring you in yearly, at least fifteen pounds a year. Indeed, I know a tradesman who has offered that before and who I think would give twenty. At all events you can clear the interest of the purchase money, and make at least a little income of twenty pounds a year more. Almost enough to keep you in boots and shoes, I declare."

"Almost enough!" cried Susie smiling, "why, you must think me extravagant Captain Ful—Jack I mean. I am sure I don't spend nearly half as much as that on boots and shoes."

"Well, that proves to me that you are a very prudent, economical young lady and will make excellent use of the little property you are about to purchase."

"Oh! dear," said Susie Knight, giving a sigh, and yet toning it down with a gentle smile, "only to think of me purchasing a property. I never bought anything in my life that cost more than a sovereign."

"Well, never mind," replied Jack Fulford, laughing at her pretty, helpless, innocent mannner, "you must trust to me—leave it all in my hands. Will you Susie?"

"Oh sir, Jack, I mean, you are so kind," the young lady said, "of course, I will leave it in your hands, and should be ungrateful indeed if I did not do as you told me. You are so much wiser than I am."

Her pure eyes beamed in his face with a sweet look of gratitude, which made his heart flutter.

"But there is one thing," she pursued, "I want to know about—who will give me fifty pounds a year for the paddock and fields?"

For a moment he felt inclined to reply, I will; but prudently restrained himself just in time. For that would have made it *too* obvious, that it was nothing more

nor less than a gift on his part. And he had sufficient both of tact and delicacy to be unwilling that she should look at it in that light.

"Oh!" he said, "I will find you a tenant. A man I know well, upon whose punctual payment of the stipulated rent you can rely. So now, I hope, you are satisfied on all points?"

"Ah! yes," replied Susie sadly, "I don't know how to be sufficiently grateful for your kindness. If only I could hope that my uncle would recover, how pleased he would be—how happy I should be?"

"Susie, it is useless grieving at the inevitable. We are all in the hands of Providence. Look on the bright side of things? If it is fated that your uncle's time has come, resign yourself to it. It is the common fate of poor humanity."

Something new this, Jack Fulford preaching a sermon; but the fact was that, in the presence of Susie Knight, witnessing her genuine grief, now gentle though sad, like a summer rain without wind, he felt—not exactly sentimental, that would not express it,—it is impossible to express it—but more serious and tender hearted, especially towards the fair innocent young creature by his side.

There was a pause, during which she remained with downcast eyes—sad and pensive, he regarding her steadfastly; his eyes dwelling on her sweet face, with an expression of subdued, dreary admiration.

She looked up — met his glance — blushed and smiled.

"And Susie," he said, "to business. Just look over those papers. I will ring for Mr. Leroy. He shall witness the deed of assignment. You will give him an acknowledgement for fifteen hundred pounds."

He rose, rang the bell, and sent a message to Leroy that he wished to see him in the drawing-room.

Susie Knight looked at the law papers in puzzled wonder, and then, after some two minutes' fruitless endeavour to make anything whatever of them—during which time Jack Fulford stood looking over her shoulder, a quiet smile on his face the while, she laid them down, and said, with charming *nüweté*.

"Oh! dear, I cannot understand one word of what it is all about. Indeed, it is as good as Hebrew to me."

"What, little lady," said Jack Fulford, smiling and laying his hand on her shoulder, "can you not make it out?"

"No, indeed I cannot, so you must explain it all to me. You will, won't you Jack?"

And as she spoke she looked smilingly up in his face.

Doors opening noiselessly and thick carpets muffling footsteps are often advantages in a gentleman's house. But sometimes there are little draw-backs, as in the present case.

For it is quite certain that Jack Fulford did not wish to be seen with his hand on Susie Knight's shoulder, to be heard addressed as Jack—a sweet smiling face turned up to his—by those who at this moment so quietly entered the room.

Lambert Leroy and Florence Grey.

They were close to Fulford and Susie, whose backs were towards them, before their presence was perceived.

CHAPTER XLVII.

PURELY A BUSINESS ONE.

FLORENCE said not a word but looked as indifferent as she could.

There was, however, a strange, cold expression on her face, which her cousin perceived and interpreted rightly at one quick glance.

"She is angry, savage with me, because she heard Susie call me Jack, saw me with my hand upon her shoulder. Why should she be, bah! it is nothing to her. I am nothing to her except a cousin, she the same to me."

Nevertheless, Jack Fulford had a heightened colour as he rose to his feet, and felt like a naughty boy detected in doing something wrong.

And even Susie Knight, innocent and guileless as she was, looking in Florence Grey's face, and reading there, coldness, displeasure, had a vague idea that she had been detected in doing or saying what she ought not to.

Leroy, too, was a witness of the charming little tableau Susie and Fulford presented as he entered the room; he saw him looking, as he thought, lovingly in her face, heard her call him in what he considered tender accents—*Jack!*

"You sent for me, Fulford," he said, trying to speak indifferently, "anything particular?"

"Well, no, not exactly, yet rather particular," replied Fulford, now thoroughly confused, for he *felt* that his cousin's eyes were steadfastly regarding him. "But it does not matter at all, that is to say, not now."

In effect, Jack Fulford was quite taken aback, and for the moment lost his nerve.

Now, Leroy was in a desperately bad humour.

It was not so much the fact of Susie Knight addressing Fulford as Jack which impressed him, but the hand upon the shoulder, the smiling tender look, with which the young lady gazed up in his face, sent a pang to the heart of Lambton Leroy.

Was he, then, in love with Susie Knight?

He himself could have laughed at the idea, or tried to do so.

Why then, did he feel so annoyed at witnessing this bit of bye play?

This question he himself would have been puzzled to answer.

"What is it, Fulford?" he asked rather sharply. "I was in the middle of a game with Scatterbrain when you sent word you wanted me."

"Oh! I beg pardon, I didn't know you were playing," said Fulford. "It was only a little private matter between you, myself, and Miss Knight."

This only made matters worse, so far as Florence Grey was concerned.

"Oh! beg pardon," she said, with a slight curtsy. "I see I am *de trop*. It was purely by accident, I assure you, Captain Fulford, that I came into the drawing room with Mr. Leroy. I met him in the hall. I am sorry to have interrupted your *tête à tête*."

Then she moved slowly towards the door.

But Susie Knight, acting with that impulsive recklessness which innocence of all harm and intention can give, started up, and throwing her arms around her, cried,—

"No, no, Florence, dear, do not be angry."

"I am not angry," replied Florence, trying to speak in a cold, unimpassioned manner.

"Yes, you are. I can see you are. Do come and sit down with me. Don't look so cold and cruel. What have I done! Oh! what have I done! I thought I had found a friend, and now I have lost her again."

Who could resist such an appeal, urged in such meek tones, and with such a meek, imploring look?

Not Florence Grey.

She kissed Susie Knight's forehead, and said—

"I am not angry with you, darling."

Fulford had by this time recovered his composure, and though angry as all men are when they make fools of themselves, and are detected, was able to speak quietly.

"Indeed, Florence, there is no secret about the matter at all, just stay and witness these papers with Leroy."

"Papers! What papers?"

"Why, a deed of assignment, of Myrtle Cottage, to Miss Susie Knight. You do not object I suppose?"

"Oh, dear, no."

"Now Leroy," said Fulford briskly, for he saw that he must hurry the matter through, or there would be a storm at least sufficient to make things very unpleasant, "hand Miss Knight the fifteen hundred pounds you are going to lend her."

At the same time he handed to Leroy the envelope that contained the cheque.

The matter had been previously arranged between them, so that Leroy could not possibly have refused even if he had wished to do so. Nor could he, considering that Jack Fulford was his intimate friend, and the great service he had that very day rendered him, even have wished, with honour.

So he took the envelope, and said merely

"Certainly, Miss Knight, here is the money. Captain Fulford has explained to you all details, of course?"

"Oh, yes! thank you," replied Susie, taking the envelope in a passive sort of way, "but really I don't quite see, don't quite understand now—am I doing right, Florence, dear?"

And she again drew near to Florence Grey and clung to her arm as though seeking protection and advice.

Now Florence was undeniably jealous of this little lady, whose innocence was her greatest charm. And yet she, with all her woman's jealousy against one whom, in her heart of hearts, she believed to be a rival, could not resist the appeal.

So she replied, quietly, even kindly, though gravely—

"I hope and believe that Captain Fulford would never do anything which was not right himself or induce anyone else to do so. I *hope* (a slight emphasis on the word) he would never act otherwise than an honourable gentleman should."

"Of course not," said Fulford, quickly, in an off-hand manner. "Now, Leroy, you write out a receipt for the fifteen hundred pounds, and Miss Knight will sign it."

Florence Grey drew back a little, and looked from one to the other.

She was angry, jealous, mystified.

"What is the meaning of all this," she said to herself. "Lambton Leroy lending the fifteen hundred pounds obviously by prearrangement with Jack. Ah! there is something in all this beneath the surface. What are these two men driving at? Are they both in love with the girl? I believe *she* is pure and honest hearted and innocent."

At this moment the train of her thoughts was interrupted by the entrance of Mr. John Graham.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

A DELICATE SUBJECT.

THE entrance of Mr. Graham diverted the attention of all for a time from the subject then on the *tapis*.

"What, Mr. Graham," said Jack Fulford rising to meet him, and speaking with unusual cordiality; "this is a surprise. Why it is not yet six o'clock, and you, starting this morning, have been to London and back!"

"Yes," replied John Graham, "I do not let the grass grow under my feet. When I set to work at business, I do it right off. I was only in London for about two hours and a half, and in that time I can assure you I did a great deal."

"I don't doubt it," said Leroy, who, now that he felt himself no longer at Graham's mercy, could afford to be amiable. "I know of old what a prompt and energetic man of business you are, Graham. I hope you have succeeded to your satisfaction in what you went about."

"Yes," replied Graham, with a quiet smile, "I am quite satisfied with my day's work."

"That is well," said Fulford. "I must confess, though, it is sharp work, to start at nine for Lambton Buzzard on horseback, take train for London, dash about in the great city for an hour or two, as you must have done, then again to Lambton Buzzard by train, and back here on horseback by six o'clock."

"Nothing like promptitude and energy in all matters of business," replied Graham, who seemed ou excellent terms with himself. "I believe men have been ruined often through a delay of half an hour on their own part. Many a splendid chance of fortune has been lost for ever through not acting instantly—striking while the iron was hot, 'seizing time by the forelock.'"

At this moment Lord Scatterbrain entered.

He had been left all alone in the billiard-room—Florence first deserting him, and then Leroy.

“Ah! now, and ain’t you ashamed of yourselves, the lot of you,” said his Lordship, good humouredly, “leaving me all alone in the billiard-room with no one but myself to play against? I couldn’t even make a match right hand against left; for, being a cripple, I’ve only got the one.”

“It was too bad, Scatterbrain,” said Fulford; “they ought to be ashamed of themselves.”

“That’s not bad on your part, Jack, who was the first to creep away. But I’ll forgive you. There was superior attraction in the drawing-room,” turning to Susie Knight, “and I, myself, was a blockhead not to have been beforehand with you.”

“That is highly complimentary to Miss Knight,” said Florence, with just a shade of displeasure in the slight smile she put on. “How can I excuse myself for detaining you from a pleasanter occupation than playing billiards with me?”

“But, Miss Grey, it was yourself who left me in the middle of a game.”

“But, Lord Scatterbrain, it was yourself who this moment said, you were a blockhead not to have gone before Captain Fulford did, and you were in the middle of a game with me.”

“Ah! now, sure I’m always making a fool of myself. I’ll never learn wisdom. You must just take no notice at all of what I say.”

“Well, that’s candid, my lud, certainly,” said Leroy, laughing. “You tell the ladies to estimate your compliments and fine speeches at what they’re worth—just nothing at all.”

Scatterbrain proceeded good humouredly to defend or rather, perhaps, excuse himself; and Mr. John Graham took advantage of the opportunity to approach Susie Knight.

“Miss Knight,” he said, “I have something to say to you of importance. Will you come over to the other window? there is a chair there. It is a delicate subject; not a secret, you must understand, but still it would be

better I spoke to you alone. It is not worth while breaking up the conversation of the company."

Susie Knight looked astonished; a little bit doubtful.

"It regards your uncle, Miss Knight," said John Graham, bending down to her, and speaking in low tones.

This was sufficient for Susie Knight.

"My uncle? ah! you have news of him."

He bowed his head gravely, and she at once rose and moved to the window he spoke of.

Then, taking another chair, he seated himself close to her.

It was a large bay window, and, seated in its recess, they were nearly hidden from the rest of the company, and out of ear-shot, at all events.

"It was this important business of your uncle's I went to town about, this morning," he began.

"On my uncle's business!" she said, opening her eyes; "about his illness?"

"No," he replied, shaking his head, "not about that."

"Then you have been to the cottage, and seen him. If he is able to talk about business, he must be better."

"I have been to the cottage, but I have not seen him. He is still unconscious."

Susie Knight looked as if she was mystified, and asked plainly:

"Then what was the business?"

"About these bailiffs."

"Bailiffs?"

"Yes. Directly I heard he was in the custody of bailiffs, I determined that I would free the poor old gentleman from that annoyance, at all events. So I went over there this morning—saw the men—got full particulars—hurried up to London—got an order from the Vice-Chancellor—came back to Lambton Buzzard by express—hurried off to the cottage—showed the bailiffs my authority, and ordered them out of the house; then I made all haste back here, and, lastly, Miss Knight, I have the pleasure to inform you, on the doctor's authority, that your uncle is decidedly better this afternoon."

Susie for a time remained silent. This about the bailiffs was new to her. Fulford and the other had mercifully kept it from her; and Graham knew this. But he was not to be deterred by any consideration of that kind from reaping the highest possible benefit he could from his journey to London, and the undoubted service he had rendered her through her uncle.

"My uncle! And my uncle was actually in the custody of bailiffs, and I did not know it!"

"Is it possible you were not aware of it, Miss Knight?"

"No, indeed. This fresh trouble, this disgrace, is new to me. Alas! I am indeed unfortunate."

"No disgrace, my dear Miss Knight, let me assure you," said Mr. John Graham, drawing his chair nearer to her's "let me explain to you."

"You are very kind," replied little Susie, down whose fair cheeks tears were now trickling. "I suppose they kept it from me from kindness."

"I thought you knew it, Miss Knight! (a deliberate lie, this) and under no circumstances should I have mentioned it, had I not remedied the evil, removed the annoyance and turned the fellows out. But let me explain, if it is not disagreeable to you."

"No, no, thank you. Do let me know all about it—surely I must have heard the worst now."

"Yes, indeed, and let us hope that the bright side of the picture is to be seen now."

His object was to make her grateful to him, well aware of what a hold this would give him on her feelings—it is through their feelings, not their reason, you must approach women, and this he well knew.

So he went on; and making a great point of a word or two from the doctor, only meant to convey the impression that the patient was no worse, said:

"In the first place, your uncle is better: that is good news, at all events."

"Yes," said Susie, brightening up; "perhaps he may recover after all."

"Let us hope so. In the next place, I have got rid of those confounded bailiffs."

"Ah! I am so glad; that was kind of you. Bailiffs in the cottage—so disgraceful!"

"No, Miss Knight, not at all disgraceful. This was not a matter of debt, but what they call in legal phraseology contempt of court."

"Contempt of court! I don't understand. I am sure my uncle would never behave rudely or contemptuously to any one."

Graham smiled.

"No, I am sure he would not knowingly. But this was caused by neglect on his part—perhaps from forgetfulness of an order of the High Court of Chancery."

"Miss Knight," said Jack Fulford, approaching them, "when you have finished your *tête à tête* with Mr. Graham, we should be glad if you would join us, to settle this little business about the cottage."

"Excuse me for a minute or so, Captain Fulford," said Susie. "Mr. Graham is telling me something which interests me greatly."

CHAPTER XLIX.

MASTER OF THE SITUATION.

THERE was perceptible on Graham's features a slight smile as of triumph.

And Jack Fulford, bowing, coldly withdrew, by no means well pleased at the young lady's reply.

"Here am I, making her a present of a freehold cottage and piece of land," he said to himself, "and she amuses herself gossiping with this man, Graham. Won't even take the trouble, it seems, to attend to the papers of the assignment. Very well, I shall not besoready another time to make a fool of myself; and I must be a fool to take so much trouble about a girl who is obviously ungrateful."

Florence Grey observed this little episode, noticed the rebuff which he received from Susie Knight (quite unintentional on her part); and, to tell the truth, rejoiced thereat.

"Why does my cousin Jack," she said, "behave in this absurd manner, making a fool of poor little Susie? I feel quite sure she is innocent and harmless enough. He wants to turn her head with his attentions and gifts of cottages. Absurd, and, worse, improper; for of course he can't mean anything serious; I am glad, though, for Susie's sake. I have a great mind, I really have——"

Florence paused in her train of thought for an instant, and then seemingly making up her mind said:

"Yes, I will—I will tell the lawyers to proceed rigorously. Perhaps he may take it into his head to squander all on some girl he takes a fancy to. The property would be much better in my keeping than in his, I'm sure."

These were Florence Grey's thoughts on the matter.

As for Lambton Leroy, he was quite as angry as Fulford at seeing Susie Knight thus monopolized by John Graham, and at the moment there came to his mind Jack's chaffing words as to his not being "in the race."

It really did seem like it.

Jack Fulford had rendered her great and substantial service, or was about to do so, by the gift of the cottage, and Graham, who had tried to bargain in such a cold-blooded, deliberate way to be let alone, had now got her ear, and she was listening to him with the utmost interest and attention.

"Curse the fellow!" muttered Leroy to himself. "I wonder what the devil he is saying to her now. Some lies or other, I'll be bound: he's as cunning as the serpent."

Scatterbrain was the only one of the gentlemen, except Graham, at all satisfied or at his ease.

He had no particular interest in the matter, and talked on to Florence Grey, neither observing that she was paying little attention to him, nor that she kept a keen eye on Graham and Susie Knight.

Meanwhile the man of business went on to explain to the young lady all about the committal of her uncle for contempt of court.

And he succeeded to admiration in implanting in her innocent breast, a deep feeling of gratitude to himself.

"And now, young lady," he said, rising, "you must attend to what Mr. Fulford has to say to you. I think he mentioned *business*, and that should never be neglected."

"Oh! Mr. Graham, I am *so* much obliged to you—you don't know how much," she said; and then acting according to her impulsive nature, she took his hand.

"I shall never forget your kindness," she said, her brown eyes beaming on his face with an expression full of gratitude.

Leroy saw this little thing too—an act of perfect innocence on her part—and ground his teeth.

"D—n his eyes!" he muttered to himself, "I'm not a bit in love with the girl myself; but I do hate the thought of that fellow, Graham, having his own way with the girl; I'm sure he means her no good."

It did not occur to Mr. Lambton Leroy at the moment that he himself had introduced Mr. John Graham to Woodford Grange, and that he was so far responsible for his conduct and, even, intentions.

Florence Grey noticed the impetuous manner in which Susie seized Graham's hand, and the look with which she accompanied the action.

But Florence was not altogether dissatisfied, though there was a sort of feeling of pity for the little girl.

"Silly little thing," she thought to herself; "she is so pure and innocent, she will believe anything a designing man may say to her. I must watch over her—be a sister."

Notwithstanding the slight feeling of jealousy with which she regarded Susie Knight, she could not be angry with her—could harbour no feeling of bitterness against her sweet innocent little friend.

"I must apologise, Captain Fulford," said Graham, "on behalf of myself and Miss Knight, for detaining her. But I had some rather agreeable news to communicate to her."

"About Mr. Knight?" asked Fulford; "is he better?"

"Yes, he is a little better. I saw the doctor to-day."

Graham did not volunteer any further information; and though both Fulford and Leroy were sure that was not the only thing which had so engrossed Susie Knight, and felt anxious to know more about it, yet they could not very well cross-question Mr. Graham.

"And now, Miss Knight, I must claim your attention to these papers. You must sign, and Mr. Leroy will witness them. He will hand you fifteen hundred pounds, for which you must give him a receipt; then you will pay the money to me, and I will give you a receipt."

John Graham pricked up his ears.

This was all new to him.

"Leroy give Susie Knight fifteen hundred pounds! That is impossible—Leroy hasn't the money."

Then, after a moment or two's thought, he said to himself:

"Ah! I have it now. It is an arrangement between him and Fulford. 'D—n them both!' he muttered savagely between his teeth; "but I will beat them yet."

"Don't you think it would be better to postpone the business until after dinner?" he said, coolly. Indeed, considering that he was only a visitor, it was almost a piece of impertinence on his part.

Fulford coloured with anger, and he favoured Graham with an indignant glance.

"Yes," continued Graham, however, coolly. "The ladies are not dressed; we are none of us dressed; and it is nearly seven o'clock."

Now Florence Grey was his ally on this occasion. She wanted to have a quiet talk with Susie Knight as to what this was all about, before the young lady committed herself to anything—even to accepting the munificent gift Fulford wished to bestow upon her.

Indeed, she felt half disposed to counsel her not to accept it. So she said:

"I quite agree with Mr. Graham. I know Lord Scatterbrain agrees with me; and I am sure Susie will, won't you, dear?"

Then she glided up to her, and gently took her hand.

"Oh yes, Florence dear; of course I agree with everything you say."

Lord Scatterbrain said, "Oh ye; confound business! You are as bad as Mr. Graham, Jack. Let's put all business on one side for the day: we'll be keeping the dinner waiting, and I'm as hungry as a hunter."

So Jack Fulford found himself utterly defeated—his game for the time check-mated, and all through the impertinent interference of John Graham.

Of course, ultimately, he would carry out his intention; but he was bitterly incensed at not being able to do it off-hand, and in a manner which should give him credit in the eyes of Susie.

So, for the present, Mr. John Graham was master of the situation.

CHAPTER L.

THE LADIES IN THE DRAWING-ROOM.

THERE really was but little time to dress for dinner; so Florence determined to postpone her talk with Susie Knight until the ladies left the table, which she determined should be as soon after the cloth was removed as possible.

Her aunt, Miss Shuttleworth, would then probably drop off to sleep in the easy chair by the fire in the drawing-room, and so she would have Susie all to herself. The dinner passed off with nothing worth chronicling.

Lord Scatterbrain and Mr. Graham alone of the gentlemen seemed in good spirits.

Leroy was silent and abstracted, while as to Jack Fulford, he could scarcely conceal his ill-humour.

After remaining for about ten minutes only over dessert, and just sipping one glass of wine, Florence

Grey managed, as ladies always can when they choose, to give the signal to her aunt, and the ladies rose and left the room.

So soon as Miss Shuttleworth had made herself comfortable, Florence drew her friend close to her on the ottoman, and said,

"Susie dear, I want to talk to you seriously. You won't be offended, will you?"

"Oh, Florence," replied the young lady reproachfully, "as if I could be offended at anything you said!"

"Well, dear," pursued Florence, "what is all this business matter about?"

"Indeed, indeed, I hardly know," replied Susie; "but there are the papers on that little table. Captain Fulford read some of them to me, but I could not understand them a bit. Perhaps you can, though, Florence dear?"

"Well never mind the papers. It is something about that little cottage close to Lambton Buz-zard, where you and your uncle live, is it not?"

"Yes Captain Fulford, oh, do you know—Florence, he is so kind!" suddenly interrupting herself, "he insists upon my calling him Jack as you do, and as he calls me Susie, of course I cannot help it."

Florence could not help smiling at the utter genuine innocence of the young lady

"Surely if ever there was such a thing in this world," she thought to herself, "this is a heart that is quite a pure unsullied gem."

And she drew Susie yet closer to her, and kissed her forehead tenderly.

"Well, dear," she said, "my cousin is going to make you a present of the cottage, is he not?"

"No, Florence, that is not it," she replied.

"What, then?"

"Why, he says I am to buy it of him, for fifteen hundred pounds."

"Buy it of him, Susie! but have you money enough?"

"No, indeed," replied Susie quite gravely. "I have only seventeen and sixpence."

Florence could not refrain from laughing at this *naïve* reply, and then said—

“But, Susie, how on earth are you to buy it for fifteen hundred pounds?”

“Oh, your cousin says that Mr. Leroy is to lend me the money. But really I cannot understand it at all.”

“Nor I either,” said Florence. “Mr. Leroy lend you fifteen hundred pounds. I did not know he was rich enough to be able to spare the money; and if he did, how on earth do you suppose you are to pay him back again?”

“Oh! dear, I don’t know. But Captain Fulford—Jack I suppose I must call him, as he insists upon it,” she added, gravely—“says I am to pay three and a half per cent. for interest; and that I can let the meadow and paddock for more than that.”

Gradually Florence began to understand her cousin’s little scheme, and though she could not help feeling a little sore on the subject, especially as she had not been consulted or taken into his confidence, she resolved that she would not interfere to frustrate the arrangement.

“After all,” she said to herself, “Jack might do worse; and I will watch over little Susie—will warn her, as a mother or elder sister, against the guiles of all men, and my cousin Jack in particular.”

But then this thought flashed across her mind:

“Supposing he falls in love with her, or fancies he is in love with her, the great stupid. There is no great harm in that, unless—unless *she falls* in love with him. And she is so grateful and tender-hearted, that such a thing is quite possible. What then?”

She paused for a reply to her own mental question.

“Well, then I suppose he must marry her. Why not? I’m sure she is too good for him, the harum-scarum scapegrace. Why not?”

And though she repeated to herself, “Why not?” she felt an inner pang, a tugging at her heart-strings, the cause of which she would not own to herself.

She would not acknowledge or even admit the possibility of her, herself, being in love with Jack Fulford.

“Of course, I feel a cousinly interest in him—a sisterly

interest in him almost, and should be only too glad to see him happily married to some one worthy of him. Of *course* I should."

And Florence then tried to dismiss the subject from her mind, and flattered herself even that she had also dismissed it from her heart.

But was it so?

She soon extracted everything from Susie Knight, and in reply to the latter, who asked her advice, said gravely:

"I think, Susie, you had better do as my cousin Jack wishes you. You see, you know nothing of business. Jack and I and Mr. Leroy will manage it all for you."

"Oh! thank you, thank you, dear Florence! It is so kind of you. I should have been so sorry if you had advised me not to do as Jack wishes me; for, of course, I must have done as you told me, and I am afraid it would have offended him; and he is so kind."

Florence smiled tenderly, but did not reply.

"And is it not kind of Mr. Leroy to lend me fifteen hundred pounds?" she went on; "although, of course, I shall pay him the interest regularly," she said gravely. "And then, you know, if ever he should want the money, I could sell the cottage directly, could I not? and pay him."

Florence drew her close to herself, and kissed her fondly.

"Oh, you dear, innocent little thing, you!" she said, "who could help loving you?"

And just then the gentlemen entered the drawing-room.

Great was the surprise of Jack Fulford at the first words Florence said to him, showing her altered mood.

"Cousin, Susie Knight has told me all about what you propose."

"Well," he said, a little nervous and embarrassed; for he more than half expected she would be bitterly hostile to the scheme. "I hope you do not object to the arrangement?"

"Not at all. I think it is a very excellent one, and quite fair to all parties."

There was a slight smile on her face as she said these last words, and Jack Fulford knew right well that she fully appreciated the one-sided nature of the bargain.

"I'm very glad of that, Florence," he said.

"Well, then, I propose now, that you conclude the business at once. Here are all the papers—I have looked at them. We can then, you know, salute Miss Knight as a property-owner—a freeholder. I declare it is a shame women should not have the suffrage; for then she could vote blue at the next election for the borough."

And so, for the present, everything seemed settled amicably.

Who shall say that Florence Grey did not behave nobly, as a true friend and woman?

But John Graham, leaning against the mantelpiece, looked on and listened, with a slight sarcastic smile on his face.

"The stupid people!" he said, to himself. "How I shall astonish them presently!"

CHAPTER LI.

MR. GRAHAM'S LAW.

JACK FULFORD, notwithstanding Florence's amiability and desire to carry out his views, felt somewhat embarrassed and, in fact, ashamed of himself.

"And yet," said he, mentally, "of what have I to be ashamed? I consider I am acting a noble part; for even my cousin Florence agrees that not only the little girl is to be petted, but that what I am about to do is right and kind."

So, doing his best to put a brave face on it, he took Susie Knight's hand, saying, "Well, Miss Knight—Susie I mean," he added quickly, with a smile—"you

see it is all settled now. You find my cousin Florence giving her sincere approbation."

Susie from under her eyelids stole a glance at Miss Grey—a timid little glance, as though her woman's instinct whispered to her that Florence was not altogether satisfied.

But that young lady, catching her young friend's look, bowed her head, a smile breaking out on her face—one which might be almost be called, notwithstanding the appearance of incongruity, a grave smile.

The next few moments were occupied in reading over and arranging the few necessary documents.

Florence Grey sat beside Susie, while Leroy and Fulford attended to the business part of the matter.

Scatterbrain stood by the piano, with his hands in the tail pockets of his dress coat, and evidently, by the expression of his face, was amused by this little scene.

In the meantime, John Graham, with his back to the fire and his shoulders against the mantelpiece, twiddling with his watch-chain, was apparently taking no notice of what was going on.

But nevertheless there was not a movement, not a word, scarcely a scratch of the pen, that escaped that keen glance.

The whole affair occupied perhaps a quarter of an hour; and when the last signature and dash of the pen had been made, Jack Fulford rose and said triumphantly, "Gentlemen, allow me to introduce you to this charming young lady, Miss Susan Knight, in a new character—as landholder, householder, freeholder, proprietress of Myrtle Cottage, with its surrounding glebe and appurtenances, for herself, her heirs, and executors for ever."

Susie blushed and smiled.

Florence kissed her, in token of congratulation.

Lambton Leroy burst out laughing.

"Bravo, Jack!" he said; "what a splendid lawyer's spoil in you! You would certainly have been on the woolsack before you were thirty."

Scatterbrain now came forward, and warmly shook Susie's hand, saying, in his pleasant Irish accent, "Here's all health and prosperity to you, Miss Knight. It's

myself that's glad to know that you, too, are one of the land-owners of England."

"A very small one, Lord Scatterbrain," said Susie, smiling—"two fields, a garden, and a little cottage."

"No matter; all the same, you're a land-owner, and have a vote for the county."

"Ah," said Susie, gravely, "then I shall vote as Florence wishes me—won't I, Florence, dear?"

"I don't know about that," returned Florence, quietly. "In these days of election petitions, bribery, and all that sort of thing, they might invalidate the election on the ground that I use undue influence over a free and independent voter."

"Oh dear," replied Susie, "I'm sure I don't know anything about it. I won't have a vote at all: I wish they would take it back."

Everyone laughed at this original mode of getting rid of electoral duties. As for little Susie, she hadn't the slightest idea that, though a woman might own a whole county, she could not vote.

And it was this innocence, without awkwardness, frankness, and *naïveté* without downright ignorance, which made her manner and conversation so charming.

John Graham, who, until the very last, stood regarding this scene with a quiet smile, now came forward to pay his respects and offer his congratulations to Susie Knight. After doing so, he said quietly, "Miss Knight, you will not be offended if I ask you one question—rather a curious one to ask a lady."

"Oh, Mr. Graham," cried the warm-hearted little Susie, "as if I could be offended with you, after all your kindness!"

And, with the words, she bestowed upon him the sweetest imaginable smile of innocent gratitude.

"Then," said the man of money, with one of his quiet, saturnine smiles, "How old are you, Miss Knight?"

"Eighteen," she replied, opening her eyes with a little bit of astonishment, and wondering what that could have to do with the matter.

The face of John Graham now assumed a grave look.

"Miss Knight, Miss Grey, gentlemen," he said, "I

am sorry to inform you that you have all been wasting your time, and that the lawyer who drew these deeds has wasted time, parchment, and stamps."

Graham said no more, but stood silently observing the effect of his words.

Leroy was the first to speak.

"Wasting our time, Graham, how do you mean?"

"Oh, nonsense," said Fulford; "I know my lawyer's an obstinate old fool in some things, but is thoroughly up to his business. I never knew him make the slightest mistake in my life."

"Possibly not," replied Graham, "when he was in full possession of the facts; but in this case I strongly suspect that that was not the case."

John Graham again held his peace, and there was something in his manner which annoyed Fulford; it seemed to proclaim too plainly that he was master of the situation, and knew it.

"Mr. Graham," he said, rather sharply, "I shall take it as a favour if you will explain at once what you mean."

"That is very easily done," said the man of business, calmly, but pausing every now and then with provoking deliberation. "Miss Knight is eighteen years of age."

"Yes, yes, we have heard that," exclaimed Fulford, now quite testily; "what then?"

"Such being the case," Graham went on still with the same deliberation, "she is a minor."

Again he paused for a minute or two, and a light slowly dawned on Fulford and Leroy, who, like many English gentlemen, were strangely ignorant of the laws of their own country.

"It follows, then," Graham went on, like a judge summing up, "that in the eye of the law she is an infant, or, plainer still, has no existence whatever separate from that of her parents or guardians."

The tears quickly welled up into little Susie's eyes.

"Oh dear! oh dear!" she murmured; "I have no parents, and my poor, kind uncle is dying. What shall I do? what shall I do?"

Her gentle head again sought refuge and comfort on Florence Grey's shoulder.

But Florence fired up in defence of her friend and sex.

"Noexistence, indeed!" she cried; "preposterous! You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Mr. Graham, to tell this young lady, my friend, that she has no existence!"

"If that is so," said Fulford, "and I have no reason to doubt the truth of Mr. Graham's assertion—"

"No assertion my dear, good sir," interrupted Graham, "it is the law of the land. I assert nothing, I merely interpret and expound."

"I was about to say," continued Fulford, who could not divest his tone of a certain tinge of annoyance, "that I will have a full conveyance drawn to transfer the cottage with its appurtenances, to Susie's father. My wish is to make this young lady and her only relations happy and independent."

Susie thanked him with her eyes, which she raised to the light all sparkling with tears, resembling dewdrops.

"You are all so kind to me," she murmured.

"My dear young lady," said John Graham, with oily smoothness, "it is not I that said you had no separate existence, but the hard, implacable, inflexible law. Your rights and interests can only be represented by your properly appointed guardians."

"Guardians!" cried Scatterbrain, now coming to the front, "then she shall have guardians. How many are there wanted, Mr. Graham?"

"Two, at the least," replied the man of business.

"Then I'll be one," cried his lordship. "I, Viscount Scatterbrain, of Ballysmashem Castle, Ireland, offer myself as one of your guardians. Will you accept me now, Miss Knight?" cried the warm-hearted peer, seizing her hand.

"Oh! Lord Scatterbrain, you are too kind, too noble; you do me too great honour."

"Devil a bit," cried his lordship, whose brogue always broke out more when he was excited. "By the piper, I'll settle this affair off in my own way. Which of you gentlemen will join me in being guardian to this young lady, Miss Susan Knight?"

Fulford knew that his cousin shot a sharp glance at him, and he shrank back.

Lambton Leroy felt a certain delicacy, and, feeling but too well the state of his own heart, did not like to thrust himself forward.

Then spake John Graham, "I will;" with the words he too took Susie Knight's hand, which she unresistingly gave to him.

CHAPTER LII.

THE GUARDIANS.

THERE was a dead silence, a silence of astonishment and dismay on the part of those who heard this extraordinary proposal from John Graham.

It was impossible for anyone to interfere with effect; for Susie Knight warmly seized John Graham's hand, and gratefully accepted his offer.

"You are too kind, Mr. Graham," the little girl said. "You are all too kind, no sooner is anything wanted than it is at once produced for me."

"I hope, Susie dear," said Florence gravely, "that you will never regret anything you may do under this roof."

"Ah! regret! nonsense!" said Scatterbrain, warmly. "Hasn't she got two fine trustees—guardians, or whatever you call us. Isn't it myself that'll look after my ward?"

As for Fulford and Leroy they were utterly aghast, Jack Fulford especially, looking as black as night.

But he was powerless to interfere.

He could not say, "Miss Knight, I warn you not to accept Mr. Graham as your trustee." Under his own roof, that was an impossibility.

What could he do?

He was utterly nonplussed ; so, drawing Leroy on one side, he began talking to him.

"And now, Lord Scatterbrain," said John Graham briskly, "we will see to these matters. We will sit down to this table, and draw up a deed. You know, I am well up in law matters."

"Come, Miss Knight, you must join us," said John Graham, and all three seating themselves at a little table, he placed pen, ink, and paper, and prepared to go to work.

Florence, though not invited, also took her place at the table, watchful, uneasy, suspicious.

John Graham was not at all disconcerted by this proceeding, but said to Lord Scatterbrain---

"Suppose, my lord, you come a little more this way and make room for Miss Grey : she would no doubt like to look after the interests of her young friend. It is very simple, Miss Grey," he said. "I am noted and hated by the lawyers for drawing up deeds strictly and undisputably valid."

And very soon Graham's facile pen was gliding over the paper, Florence looking on coldly, Susie Knight with admiring gratitude.

As he wrote, he explained to Scatterbrain in an easy offhand manner ; and, although it must be allowed his lordship knew little about it, he assented, by bowing his head.

Meanwhile Fulford and Leroy paced up and down the room, conversing in low tones, and every now and then casting uneasy glances at the table where the preparing of the deed was going on.

As for Florence, she sat pale and still, wondering to herself what would be the result of the new and extraordinary turn affairs had taken.

In the course of half-an-hour, John Graham had drawn out what he called the abstract of a deed, and other documents, which he now proposed to read over to the assembled company.

It is not necessary here to recapitulate all that he had written, or its legal phraseology ; but its legal acumen could not have been impaired by the cleverest attorney living.

Florence looked and listened in perfect silence; Susie with the earnest gratitude she had before evinced.

Scatterbrain knew very little about it, and the other two knew not how to express their dissatisfaction.

"Well, gentlemen," said John Graham, "what do you think of my deed-drawing skill; what do you think of it, Lord Scatterbrain—you being my joint trustee and guardian?"

"By my faith," said Scatterbrain, "I think it very pretty indeed."

"And what do you think of it, Miss Knight?" he said turning to that young lady.

"Oh! what can I say, Mr. Graham? You are too kind, I leave it all in your hands, and Lord Scatterbrain's."

These words filled Fulford and Leroy with fury.

It cut the ground entirely from under their feet. They could not now possibly interfere, for the young lady of her own free will then threw herself into the arms of John Graham.

It was true that she connected him with Lord Scatterbrain, but both Fulford and Leroy knew right well the London financial agent would carry it all his own way with the Irish Peer.

So Fulford answered coldly—

"Of course, if Miss Knight is satisfied I must be, and I shall only be too glad to forward her interests in any way."

Fulford spoke and looked coldly and gloomily, and Graham chuckled inwardly, fully aware of the importance of his victory.

"I would suggest, however," said Fulford, in as calm and unconcerned manner as he could, "that these deeds you have so rapidly prepared, Mr. Graham, should be submitted to a professional lawyer before the young lady affixes her signature, and finally binds herself. I do not doubt your legal acumen," he said, with a slight sneer in his tone, "still, in my opinion, it would be more satisfactory and better in every way for a lawyer to go

through the papers and explain their meaning and purport to Miss Knight."

"Oh, certainly, certainly," replied Graham, "I quite agree with you, Captain Fulford; I merely meant to obtain Miss Knight's approval in a broad sense, in the abstract so to speak."

"Now, Miss Knight, I'll just explain to you, this short document or deed is one appointing myself and Lord Scatterbrain your trustees and guardians, the whole of the property we will now receive through Captain Fulford in trust for you; to that I presume you have no objection, Captain Fulford?"

"No, I have no right to object, the young lady has made her choice."

Susie Knight looked at him rather doubtfully, a suspicion crossing her mind that he was not well pleased, but she could not be certain.

"This is the effect of the first document," pursued John Graham, "and to this, as the property comes from Captain Fulford, his consent is necessary, as is yours Miss Knight, with my own and that of Lord Scatterbrain. As Captain Fulford has assented generally in the abstract, I purpose that we all endorse this paper, then it can be submitted to a lawyer, properly engrossed on parchment, and duly signed in form."

"Now, Miss Knight, just scribble your name on the back," he said, having folded up the paper in the orthodox legal manner.

She did so, and then handed it to Scatterbrain.

"Now, Lord Scatterbrain, we want your noble signature."

The bondsman scribbled his name across at once.

And then John Graham affixed his own.

"And now Captain Fulford yours, and the affair is so far finished," said Graham, attempting a pleasant smile.

Fulford with a very ill grace took the pen, hesitating for a moment or two as if about to throw it down, and then wrote his name.

"The other document is not of such immediate importance," said Graham. "It merely appoints me and

Lord Scatterbrain your permanent guardians, in case anything should happen to your poor uncle."

"Oh! thank you, thank you, Mr. Graham," said Susie Knight, tears filling her eyes at the mention of her uncle. "You are very kind. It is so pleasant to have some one to look up to, to know that you have some one to protect you."

Jack Fulford frowned, and looked as he felt—offended.

"I am sorry, Miss Knight," he said, "that you should set so little store by your other friends—myself, and my cousin, for instance."

"Oh, Captain Fulford, I didn't mean that. Did I, Florence? You know I did not."

"No, Susie dear," said Florence, "you meant nothing unkind, or ungrateful, to anybody. Come upstairs with me, now, I want to talk to you."

The two young ladies left the drawing-room, and Fulford, taking Leroy by the arm, strolled away with him, leaving Lord Scatterbrain and John Graham, Susie Knight's guardians, or trustees, *tête à tête* together.

"Well," said Fulford, "this is a nice kettle of fish, certainly."

"That fellow, Graham, has the impudence of the devil," replied Leroy.

"The cool, off-hand manner in which he proposed himself as joint trustee, was perfectly astounding. Had it been anywhere but under my own roof, and he a giant," said Fulford, "I would have vehemently opposed it, in fact, I regret now that I did not do so at all hazards."

"Well, but can't you put a stop to it, even now," said Leroy.

"No, impossible, my cousin Florence would at once put it down to jealousy on my part."

"H'm—ah!" said Leroy, looking hard at the floor, that fellow, Graham, has gained the day, has beaten us thoroughly this time. D—n him!"

"Amen," said Fulford.

The affair as it now stood had assumed a really very serious aspect; and that evening Fulford and Leroy,

after having thought over the events of the day, went together into their dressing-room, and had a long talk.

This move on the part of John Graham was a bold stroke, and could only have succeeded by good fortune, audacity, and the easy good-nature of Susie Knight and Scatterbrain together.

As for the young lady, she declared herself quite satisfied with the arrangement, when questioned on the subject by Florence Grey, and expressed the greatest gratitude to both Lord Scatterbrain and Mr. Graham for the interest they took in her, and the trouble they were willing to incur.

As things now stood, the existing arrangement, though not absolutely completed, could not be thrown over without reasons strong enough to cause Miss Knight to refuse to carry out the proposed arrangement.

And certainly Floren  e did not see her way to advise Susie to have nothing whatever to do with Mr. John Graham.

It is true she had a vague distrust of him, and did not consider him at all an eligible guardian or trustee for her charming little friend. But with no absolute valid cause of objection to urge, she felt she could do nothing.

Lord Scatterbrain, on his part, being called into conclave with Leroy and Fulford in the comfortable dressing-room of the latter, treated the whole matter very lightly

"On my faith and soul," he said, "I don't see what it matters. The little girl's a country-woman of mine; she's all alone in the world—leastwise, she will be when this old uncle of hers is gone. I'm glad to be able to help her and take care of her; and as to the expense and time, it's not that would trouble me. If she wanted a thousand or two, she should have it, at any moment."

"Yes, yes, Scatterbrain," said Fulford, "but that is not the question."

"But that just is the question. I'm to be her guardian. Well, I'll just see that she wants nothing, and the man that dare injure or speak a word against her will have a bad time of it, I reckon."

"That's all very true," replied Fulford; "but you

seem to forget that there is to be another guardian and trustee, with equal powers as yourself — Mr. John Graham."

"And what if he has, so long as he hasn't got greater power? He can do nothing without me; at least, I take it that's the law

"I don't know about that," put in Leroy. "In your absence, abroad or anywhere, I'm not sure he could not act without you. And then, you see, Graham is a hard man of business, a keen man—a shrewd man—a hard man."

"And I'm just the contrary; so that it's a good thing there's one of us clever at business matters."

"My dear Scatterbrain, you don't seem to understand the state of affairs."

"I know I'm stupid as an owl; so just explain to me, if you'll be so kind," replied his lordship.

"Well, then, this is just it. Mr. John Graham is a shrewd, hard man of the world, bent on making money, and pushing himself forward."

"And small blame to him either, if he does it by fair and square means."

"Exactly. But you must understand that Mr. Graham might consider means perfectly fair and legitimate, which we, being merely gentlemen, and not men of business, would think very doubtful—dishonourable even, perhaps."

"Then, if I were to see anything of that sort, I'm just the boy to put a stop to it, and that right sharp."

"I don't doubt your will, Scatterbrain, but your skill in successfully contending with a hard man of the world."

"But what's all this to do with Susie Knight?" asked Scatterbrain.

"A great deal, I fancy. You are aware, perhaps, that the young lady has a magnificent voice, and being decidedly clever, and with a charming appearance, has every prospect of distinguishing herself professionally on the stage—either in opera or drama."

"Well! I'm right down glad to hear it," said Scatterbrain.

"Now, this Mr. Graham," Fulford pursued, "is well aware of this. He is conversant with all matters dramatic and operatic, knowing the managers and lessees, and having himself speculated. He has an eye on Susie Knight; at least, so both I and Leroy are inclined to think. I mean, to speak plainly, that he is of opinion that there is a fortune to be made out of the young lady's talent and voice."

"Perhaps," remarked Scatterbrain, evincing deeper thought than either gave him credit for, "it might not be a bad thing for the girl; that is to say, if she gets a fair share of advantage out of any arrangement. I know well that it is difficult, almost impossible, for any woman—especially a young one, quite innocent and inexperienced, to deal with men in business matters. Now, this Mr. Graham, knowing managers and lessees, having influence, doubtless might get Miss Knight brought out; in fact, make a profitable arrangement for her."

"There is some truth in that, Scatterbrain," said Fulford. "Leroy and I have thought about it. But, to speak plainly right out, we are fearful lest Mr. Graham should get the young lady entirely in his hands, prevail on her, in her innocence and ignorance, to sign an agreement which should bind her utterly and entirely to himself—make her entirely his slave."

"Ah!" said Scatterbrain, "that must be seen to."

"And, moreover," continued Fulford, determined to speak out boldly, now that he had commenced, "Leroy and I are of opinion that he looks with favourable eyes on the young lady in another sense."

"You mean he's in love with her," said his lordship bluntly.

"Well, perhaps not exactly that; but we'll say he's attracted by her grace and beauty; smitten by her, in fact."

"Well," said Scatterbrain, "if he's disposed to offer her honourable marriage, and she's disposed to accept him, it seems to me that it's her affair. Of course, if he married her, he'd have to make some arrangement—settlement, or whatever the lawyers call it."

"Very true," replied Fulford, "if he meant honourable

marriage. But you know what a world this is, Scatterbrain, and what a loose code of morality men of the world—men of pleasure—rule their conduct by. Suppose he looked upon her with different views?”

As Fulford spoke, he looked Scatterbrain full in the face. The latter rose to his feet, and striking his clenched hand on the mantel-piece, exclaimed vehemently—excitedly even:

“By the piper that played before Moses, if ever I have reason to think he dhrames of such a thing, I’ll wring the head off his shoulders, as I would a sparrow’s!”

After some further conversation, the friends separated, and went to their respective rooms, each one, especially Fulford and Leroy, pondering deeply on the events of the day, and by no means satisfied.

And now we must get on to more stirring events.

CHAPTER LIII.

INDEPENDENCE.

ON the following evening, Jack Fulford, when all were in the drawing-room, brought up the subject of the preceding night.

He found fault with Graham’s deed, and said he would prefer having everything arranged by his own lawyer.

“I will send for Stokes now! Stokes has been my legal adviser for years, and I will ask him if I cannot make a free gift to Miss Knight.”

He and Leroy were determined to defeat Graham if they could.

“I don’t like the idea of appointing guardians,” he went on, “what I wanted was, that Miss Knight should do as she liked with the cottage.”

“Has Mr. Graham any objection to that course?” supplemented Fulford with a slight sneer.

"How can I have any voice or interest in the matter, one way or other," answered Graham; "if you choose to give away your property to make other people happy, I must say you are a delightful communist, and there it ends, with this addendum in the present instance, you could not have had a more charming, or really deserving recipient of your bounty."

Both Fulford and Leroy looked vexed at this speech, which was spoken in a calm agreeable tone, at which they could not take offence.

The word 'bounty' fell harshly upon Susie Knight's ears, she began to understand that she had done nothing to deserve this free gift of land from a man, who a short time before had been an entire stranger to her, and now her pride came to her aid, and she said, "Pray Mr. Fulford do not talk any more about giving me things, I do not want anybody's charity. To-morrow I will go back to my poor, dear uncle, from whom I have been a bad, wicked girl to stay away so long."

Lady Jane seemed glad at this determination on her part, and did not endeavour to dissuade her, though Florence tried to comfort her, and induce her to change her mind, but without avail.

Soon afterwards she retired to bed.

As she passed and wished him good night, Mr. Graham contrived to say in a low tone, "I admire your independence, you are a heroine."

Her pale face flushed a little as she went on, for she knew the praise was just, and it pleased her. She was about to do her duty, and a sweet consciousness of being and doing right sustained her.

Florence accompanied her to her chamber, but did not stay long, as Susie pleaded a wish to go to sleep as soon as she could. When she was alone, she sank on her knees, and prayed devoutly for some time. Her devotions produced a holy calm which enabled her to drop off to sleep, ardently wishing for the coming of the morning.

CHAPTER LIV

THROWN ON THE WORLD.

AFTER Susie Knight's resolute refusal to become the recipient of his bounty, as Mr. Graham had cleverly phrased it, Fulford could not with any decency press her, so tearing up the conveyance he threw it into the fire, and plunged into a profound melancholy from which all the efforts of Lambton Leroy were unavailable to extricate him.

The day following saw Susie take an affectionate leave of her kind friends. She was driven over to Rosebine Cottage at Lambton Buzzard, and arrived just in time to receive her uncle's last breath.

The old man was dying.

His eyes regarded her with an expression of pleasure, but the light quickly waned and died out altogether, and his spirit passed away.

Susie, unable to bear this terrible blow, became violently hysterical, passing from one fit into another, and requiring all the care and attention of the doctor.

The news soon spread, and the inmates of the Grange quickly arrived at the scene of sorrow, to afford what consolation they were able. They would have taken Susie away with them, had she not been resolute in saying she would remain where she was until the last, then she said, "She would think what to do."

The only person who abstained from giving her advice, and offering her consolation in the shape of scriptural texts, stereotype phrases, which he knew would do her no earthly good, was Mr. Graham. He, like a sensible man, bided his time, feeling sure that after the funeral she would begin to think of the future, which would be the proper time to speak to her, and put in execution the design he entertained respecting her.

Jack Fulford more than suspected that Graham was playing a deep game, but as the latter never allowed his hand to be seen, he could not tell in what direction he was working, and was forced to be content with vague surmises and wild suspicions.

The death of Mr. Knight broke up the party at the Grange. Everyone was going in different directions. Lord Scatterbrain expressed his determination of going abroad, and Fulford his willingness to accompany him, which offer was accepted.

"Shure I want a kind friend at me back," said Scatterbrain, "and its yourself that's as true as steel to me. But I'll not forget you my bhoys." Lambton Leroy was going back to London, Florence and Lady Jane remained in the country. The latter parted affectionately almost with Lord Scatterbrain. In spite of all the drawbacks with which he was surrounded she did not dislike him, a feeling of affection had begun to creep into her proud heart, and her voice trembled with tenderness when they parted. Scatterbrain expressed a sincere wish that they might meet again soon. After the funeral Mr. Graham visited Susan Knight; she was alone and in tears. Very many had she shed lately. Mr. Graham apologised for the liberty he was going to take in talking of business, but his stay in the country was drawing to a close and he wished to know if he could be of service to her.

Susie shook her head sadly.

"Permit me to contradict you," he continued "I think I can be of very great service to you. Here are you at a tender age thrown on the world, you have no one to protect you. No visible means of subsistence, and find yourself in a truly deplorable position, which is all the more so on account of it being so totally unexpected and awfully sudden."

"Oh! oh!" cried Susie.

"That is the black side of the picture." Mr. Graham went on, disregarding her tears and exclamations of grief. "Now for the bright one, you are young, talented, exceptionally gifted I may say, and I believe have a magnificent career before you, if anyone will put

you in the way of accomplishing what I verily believe to be your destiny.

Susie dried her tears and looked up. He began to excite a strange interest in her mind.

"Yes," said Mr. Graham, "I am firmly convinced that nature has given you a splendid voice, of course the organ requires cultivation. Now, I am prepared to take you by the hand, place you abroad at my own expense where you will have the advantage of teaching by the best masters. If you are successful as *prima donna* you can repay me with what interest you like. If not—but I will not anticipate failure where I am confident of success."

Susie reflected.

"Well," he added after a pause of some duration, "what do you say, will you accept my offer?"

"You purpose to educate my voice, so that I may fit myself for an operatic singer."

"I do."

"You will kindly and disinterestedly pay all expenses till I am able to make my *débüt*. Why do you do this, Mr. Graham?" asked the young girl, eyeing him sharply; "answer me candidly."

"Because I hope to be able to make money out of you. It is a pure matter of business," he answered.

"A pure matter of business," she repeated to herself several times.

She then lapsed into reflection once more.

Mr. Graham did not interrupt the flow of her thoughts: he waited patiently for her to speak, which she did at length.

"Call upon me to-morrow morning, if you will be good enough, and you shall have my answer," she said.

Mr. Graham took up his hat, bowed, and quitted the room. A smile of triumph sat on his lips, for he knew that he had conquered.

Nor was he mistaken.

On the following day Susan Knight accepted his offer.

In a few hours all her preparations were complete. She took leave of the few friends she possessed in Lambton Buzzard, telling them that she meant to go on the stage, and was about to proceed to Milan to cultivate her voice.

To the company at the Grange she addressed a note informing them simply that she was going to London, and wishing them a long farewell.

As she and Mr. Graham took their seats in a first-class carriage, and she gazed on the town of her youth perhaps for the last time, her tears fell like rain, and her heart began to ache.

But her companion being a pleasant talker, continued to turn her thoughts from the present to the future, and hope, which springs eternal in the human breast, re-animating her drooping spirits, and she thought with pleasure on the career which lay before her.

CHAPTER LV.

SCATTERBRAIN ABROAD.

JACK FULFORD and Scatterbrain proceeded first of all to London, from whence his lordship took a run over to Ireland to hear if his tenants had any wrongs which they wanted redressed, and to put his affairs in order generally, as he expected to be abroad for a year or two.

While at Ballysmashem Castle, one of his servants, named Mickey Doolan, an honest, faithful, but not too clever fellow, begged his master to take him abroad with him.

Scatterbrain, thinking that he should like the companionship of one of his own countrymen, and knowing that he must have a valet of some kind, acceded to his request, in which there was nothing unreasonable.

His lordship was a great blunderer himself, oc-

casionaly having that confusion of ideas which always seems to reign more or less in an Irishman's head, but at blundering Mickey Doolan beat him out and out.

If it was possible to do anything wrongly, Mickey would go just that way to work, and sometimes his blunders were amusing enough, at others they were serious.

When master and man arrived in town, Jack Fulford was delighted to see Scatterbrain, but he stared at Mickey, saying, "Who have we here?"

"This is Mickey Doolan, my confidential valet," answered Scatterbrain.

"Oh, I wish you joy of him," returned Fulford, glancing contemptuously at the man whom he regarded as a wild Irishman.

In the afternoon of the first day of their arrival, Jack ordered the phaeton and drove out, Scatterbrain, preferring to stay at home and rest after the fatigue of his journey.

Fulford stopped at a theatre and engaged a box, for there was an Irish farce running at the time, which he thought would amuse and interest his friend.

Driving back to the hotel at which they were stopping, he beckoned to Mickey Doolan, whom he saw standing in the hall, and said, as he came up, "Go and tell your master that I've got a box for the theatre, and ask him if he'll go, as I will send it to someone else if he does not care about it."

Mick scratched his head, wondering what a theatre was, and being about to ask, when Fulford cried loudly, "Now, be off, you bog-trotting fool."

"Begorra," muttered Mick, as he went along, "it's meself that's thinking a little experience of the bogs of ould Ireland would tache you civil manners."

He went upstairs, and found his master lying on a sofa, smoking, and reading a book.

"Well, Mick, what do want now?" he asked.

"Plaze your honour, then, Mistorher Fulford's at the door with a tearin' fine pair of horses, who says he's got a box for you there; and you're to say when you'll go, or he'll give it to some one else if you don't care about it."

"A box!" repeated Scatterbrain; "It's very thoughtful of him, but I've got more portmanteaus now than I know what to do with. Tell him I'm much obliged, but he'd better send it back, or they'll make him pay for it."

Mick descended the stairs with this message only partly impressed on his memory.

"Well," said Jack Fulford, "what does his lordship say?"

"You're to send it back again, or he'll make you pay for it. He doesn't want no more boxes at all, at all," said Mick.

Jack Fulford coloured up, but, checking his rising anger, he said, "I expect you have made some blunder; but since I have such a message as that sent me, I shall not trouble myself any more about it. Tell his lordship that he has got an ass to deal with, and that's you."

Whipping up his horses spitefully, Fulford drove off to invite some one else to go to the play, and Mickey Doolan again visited the drawing-room.

"Well!" ejaculated Scatterbrain.

"Tear and ages, your honour, but it's Mither Fulford that's the insultin' baste when he's in the black temper."

"What has he said or done?"

"He tould me to tell your honour's lordship that you're an ass to dale with; and that's not a word of a lie."

"Why, you thundering thief!" cried his lordship, springing up; so you mean to take his part against me, that's brought you up to London, and treated you as if you was my foster brother.

"Is it that I mane," cried Mick, retreating in terror before the menacing looks of his master, "may I niver see heaven and the holy angels."

He would have said more, but he could not tell what he really meant, so confused was he. Crossing himself, he waited for his master to speak.

"I suppose you mean, there's no lie in what you've told me? I thought you were endorsing what Mr.

Fulford chose to say;" observed his lordship. "Never mind, Mick, I'll settle accounts with him when he comes back. I'm an ass, am I? Very well: by the powers, I'll let him know an ass can kick."

"Och, your honour," exclaimed Mick, in a tone of genuine concern, "shure and it's frightening the loikes of him ye'd be afther. A word or two from you will tache him to respect his betthers. Be jabbers, and it's the illigant talker your honour is."

Scatterbrain dismissed Mickey Doolan, and waited with some impatience until the return of Fulford, whom he expected to dinner. He was very much hurt to think that his friend Jack should so far presume upon his friendship as to send an impertinent message to him by his own valet.

"Because I wasn't born a gentleman," said he to himself, bitterly, "he thinks I will put up with this treatment. But he's mistaken. I've the hot Irish blood in me."

Dinner was ordered at six, and at that time Fulford, who was late, came in, and was rushing upstairs to dress, when Mick stopped him, saying, "The masther wishes to spake with you, sir."

"Ask him to be good enough to wait till I'm dressed. It's late now, and we shall keep the dinner waiting. He knows I am going out to-night."

The drawing-room door was open, and Scatterbrain heard this message, which there was, consequently, no necessity for Mickey Doolan to repeat.

"Confound him," muttered his lordship, "what does he mean? I know he is going out to-night? I know nothing whatever about it."

In ten minutes Jack descended, having hastily dressed himself, and was surprised to meet with a cold, repelling glance from Scatterbrain, who said, "I don't think this is proper treatment of me on your part, Mr. Fulford."

"Proper treatment! what do you mean? If any one has a right to cry out and complain, it is me," replied Fulford.

"First of all, you go and make mad, absurd purchases."

"God bless the man, I've bought nothing to-day."

"Didn't you say you had got a box for me?"

"Yes, I did."

"What's that but a purchase then, Mr. Fulford, I should like to know? Answer me that," said Scatterbrain, loudly.

"And a very sensible one too," rejoined Jack, who was as yet in the dark.

"You know I've got plenty of portmanteaus," said his lordship with rising anger, "and because I said I didn't want your box, you sent back word I was an ass to deal with. The devil take your dhirty box, Mr. Fulford. I'm not the man to stand still and be insulted, if I am an ass."

Jack Fulford burst out into an uncontrollable fit of laughter.

"They say your countrymen are the most amusing set of fellows in the world," he exclaimed, when he had sufficiently recovered himself to be able to speak; "and I am inclined to agree with those who are responsible for the saying. Listen to this, my unsophisticated Hibernian fire-eater. The box I bought wasn't a box at all. Unriddle that if you can."

Scatterbrain remained obstinately silent.

"It was a box for the theatre; no more or less. There is a play called 'The Shamrock, or the Flower of Erin,' and I thought you'd be pleased with it, so I bought a box for it; but your blundering fool of a servant bungled my message, and brought you to the verge of a duel. Ha! ha! It's a good joke; but really, my dear fellow, you must be more cool; and if I were you, I'd get rid of Mickey Doolan, you will be lugged into no end of scrapes by his stupidity if you don't."

Suddenly a voice exclaimed behind him, in a tone of great wrath, "Bad cess to you, for trying to take the bread out of a poor man's mouth. It's his honour's lordship, praise and glory be to God, that's the gintleman born, and won't listen to the likes of you. Bad luck to you, I say, for backbitin' and slanderin' the poor."

"Order him out of the room, or I shall kick him out, Scatterbrain;" said Fulford.

It was Mickey Doolan, who had been listening at the half-open door, and could not restrain his passion when he heard himself attacked.

A sign and a word caused the faithful retainer to retire ; and Scatterbrain, who saw that there had been a mistake somewhere, said, "I suppose I have made a fool of myself, and that Mick was right in what he said ; but it was more his fault than mine. Poor fellow, he did not know what a box at a theatre is."

"It's all over now. Give me your hand, and let's go to dinner. I've invited another fellow to come with me, but the box holds four, and there will be plenty of room for you," answered Fulford.

A week after this episode of the box, Scatterbrain started for Paris, accompanied by Fulford and Mickey Doolan, with whom he would on no account part.

"I wasn't always so sharp as I am now," he said ; "there was a time when I used to make blunders."

"But that was before you became a peer of the realm," observed Fulford.

"Yes, I suppose that makes a difference."

"On the principle of '*noblesse oblige* ?'"

"Perhaps so," replied Scatterbrain, who did not know the meaning of the words, but would not admit his ignorance.

In Paris, he took lessons in French assiduously from a competent master, but did not make very good progress ; the construction of sentences he found difficult, and his accent was atrociously bad.

Occasionally Jack Fulford had a letter from Lambton Leroy, giving him such news as he had to communicate.

No one knew anything of Susan Knight. She had gone abroad, it was currently reported, to cultivate her voice. Some said she was to train herself for a professional career, under the auspices of Mr. Graham ; but this seemed improbable, as the solicitor was always to be found in London at his place of business.

"I should like to see that little girl again, I took quite a fancy to her," exclaimed Scatterbrain, after Jack Fulford had read this part of the letter to him.

"So did I," observed Fulford.

"We should have been rivals, then," answered his lordship, laughing.

"Not exactly. I don't think I cared enough about her for that. If I ever marry, it will be little Florry, my cousin. But I have a horror of matrimony, and am not in the humour to let myself be caught yet.

"Nor I," exclaimed Scatterbrain, musingly; "at present I cannot say that I have seen any woman who can fascinate me. Still, I did like Susie; and if we had been much more together—well, I would not have answered for the consequences. I hope she will be successful in the career she has chosen."

"Perhaps she will, and perhaps she won't. There is a frightful amount of chance in all these things," answered Fulford; "she may become a swell, and, on the other hand, she may only make her three or four pounds a week as a concert hack, and end by marrying a fiddler."

"Rather a gloomy picture of her future, is it not? cannot you draw something brighter?"

"Why?"

"Oh, I don't know, exactly. I can only repeat, I liked her. Heigho! what a funny world this is, and what a weak creature, after all, is man."

"Don't moralise," said Fulford.

"Finish reading your letter, then. How is Lady Vavasour?" said Scatterbrain, with a yawn.

"Lady Jane is in the enjoyment of excellent health, and frequently enquires for you. What do you think of that?"

"I am sincerely obliged to her ladyship," said Scatterbrain, smiling, "but she might as well have spared herself the trouble, for I am not much smitten in that quarter."

"That is all," continued Fulford. "Here's your French master," he added, as there was a knock at the door, "I know his knock, and it is about his time to call. While you are engaged I shall take a stroll. By the way, when will you come down to Versailles?"

"It's too late to day."

"Say to-morrow. You will like the place, though it is something like our Hampton Court."

Jack Fulford went out as the French master entered. Scatterbrain immediately fell to work, and was soon busily occupied in conjugating a French Verb.

CHAPTER LVI.

MICKEY DOOLAN'S BLUNDER.

LORD SCATTERBRAIN and Jack Fulford made some acquaintances, and received invitations, though they did not care very much about going out.

"If I could only talk to them, I should not care so much," observed Scatterbrain.

"Oh! you'll soon pick it up," answered Fulford, "and the more you go about, the more likely you are to do so."

Among these acquaintances, was a family named Valliere, living in the Rue de Grenelle, St. Germain. It consisted of the mother, father, and the daughter, Blanche la Valliere, who took a great fancy to his lordship, and was encouraged by her parents to make a conquest of an English 'milor,' who was currently reported to be very rich.

Living near them was a widow, named M^{me}. Sartignes, She was not more than six and twenty, and had lost her husband in Algeria. The good man had been a captain in the Chasseurs d'Afrique, and was killed in a skirmish with the Arabs.

It was at the house of the Vallieres, in the Rue de Greuelle, that Scatterbrain had met M^{me}. Sartignes, who had been a bosom friend of Blanche.

Let us describe the two ladies.

Blanche was tall, dark, elegant, and rather stupid, one and twenty, rather strictly goverued by her mother, a Romau Catholic, political sentiments legitimist, badly read, able to play, and sing a little, and pretty.

M^{me}. Sartignes was uot ouly pretty but piquant,

small as to her hands, ears, feet; and rather plump, she made what one calls a little woman; very erratic in conversation; quite young for a widow; as we have said, desirous of making a good second match; a most dangerous flirter; a good dresser; and tolerably well off.

When Blanche saw that her friend Amine de Sartignes was inclined to receive Scatterbrain's presents and polite advances, she conceived a great dislike for her, which ripened into a mortal hatred, a quarrel took place, and the two former friends became deadly enemies, of the two Scatterbrain preferred the Sartignes, though he had no serious intention of marrying either one or the other.

Whenever he took a fancy to any woman, he always thought of little Susie Knight, and she stepped between him and his growing affection as if it was destined that he was to meet her again, and her phantom forbade his heart to stray.

This was odd, because he had in no way whatever committed himself with Susie. He had not even paid her any extraordinary attention at the Grange. Still she had made an impression on his mind, which absence and time deepened in such a way that he could not efface it.

It was nevertheless pleasant to bask in the smiles of the pretty and vivacious de Sartignes, and it was equally agreeable to listen to the melodious ballads and operatic snatches of Blanche Valliere.

They both talked a little English, and with what broken French he knew, Scatterbrain, with their help, got up a compound language, which enabled them to converse in a difficult way. If any obstacle more serious than usual occurred, Jack Fulford, an accomplished French scholar, was called in, and he promptly bridged over the impediment.

It happened one day that Scatterbrain was riding in the Bois de Boulogne with Fulford. Mickey Doolan, handsomely dressed in the costume of an English groom, was behind them.

A lady's horse ran away, and she fell off. Instantly a large crowd assembled and blocked up the road.

Scatterbrain's horse was at the edge of the crowd which increased every moment. Before the animal stood a lady, with a prodigiously large chignon of an almost impossible hay colour. The horse might have been forgiven for making a mistake, on account of the similarity between the hair and a wisp of hay.

At all events, the beast, forgetting his education and what was due to a lady, made a plunge forward, and seized the chignon and began to munch it; but as it did not realise his somewhat extravagant anticipations he dropped it with an impatient snort; which was an equine protest against any more hay of that peculiar description. The lady, deprived of her chignon, uttered a dismal cry, and turned round to see who the wretch was that had dared to take liberties with her golden tresses.

The sight of a horse chewing up her beautiful chignon, nearly caused her to faint, and the fact of Scatterbrain being on the back of the principal offender did not mend matters.

It was Madame Sartignes who had been indulging herself in a promenade in the *Bois*.

Horrible catastrophe!

What was to be done? Her *fiacre* was but a little way off. Without bestowing more than one reproachful glance upon Scatterbrain, the innocent cause of the mischief, she left the wreck of her chignon on the ground, and plunging into the crowd, made the best of her way to the place where her *voiture* was standing. Into this she jumped, telling the driver to go back to Paris as quickly as he might.

Throwing herself back on the cushion of the carriage, she wept tears of vexation and disappointment. It chanced that the chignon was one new the day before, purchased in the Rue de la Paix, and worth forty francs; but that was nothing in comparison with the disgrace and annoyance which she suffered in consequence of the voracious, unnatural appetite of Scatterbrain's brute of a horse.

Scatterbrain was quite confounded.

He had recognised the pretty little widow, and he had seen his horse munching her chignon, which was lying on

the ground at his feet. If she had been in sight he would have picked it up and run after her with it. Such was his *gaucherie*; but she had disappeared he knew not whither.

What then remained for him to do?

The natural answer which he made to this question was simply this, "Buy her another."

Being a man of modest manner and thought, he did not care about going into a shop and asking for a lady's chignon, so he determined to give Mickey Doolan his purse, and tell him to go and buy the finest chignon he could get for love or money.

If it cost him a couple of hundred pounds he would not have cared an atom, so long as he could make some slight reparation to Madame Sartignes for the grievous wrong which his unruly steed had done her. Fulford had not witnessed this episode; his attention had been taken up with the lady who was thrown from her horse, and he was surprised when Scatterbrain said he wanted to return immediately to Paris.

He had no wish to do so himself, consequently Mickey Doolan and his lordship returned by themselves.

When they arrived at the hotel, Scatterbrain sent for Mickey, and handing him his purse, said, impressively, "Go to a shop, Mick, where they sell *cheveux*, and get a fine new ornament for Madame Sartignes, and take it to her house. Here's the number, 51, Rue Maurigny, Faubourg St. Germain. I'll put it down on a piece of paper for you, because you shan't make a mistake."

"Faith, sir, and its meself that will do the thing right," responded Mick with a confident air, "and is it shivoo I am to ask for?"

"That's it."

"How do you spell it, your honour?"

"Never mind how it's spelt. The pronunciation's the thing, and you've got it exactly, as if you'd been born a *parley-vou*."

So Mickey Doolan started on his journey, having a very vague idea of what he was to purchase. It was some back hair for a lady he thought, but if they had given him an elephant he would have bought it.

He kept on saying shivoo, shivoo, to himself, but his thoughts wandered and he thought of something else.

Suddenly he broke out all over in a cold perspiration.

Ali Baba, when he had forgotten the famous "sesame" and could not get out of the robbers' cave, could not have been more alarmed.

Mickey Doolan could not recollect the word.

He stopped, and scratched his head. At his left was a carriage yard, and in it a *voiture*, with horse attached, waiting for hire. Touching the horse, he said to the driver, who was on his box, "What's this?" The driver did not understand English, but from Mickey's violent gesticulations which followed his question, he began to comprehend his meaning, towards which he was further assisted by a son of the proprietor of the yard, who was learning English, and joined in the conversation.

"That's *cheval*," said the boy, "you want one?"

Mickey had vainly pointed out the hair on the horse's back, but when he heard the word, it so far resembled the other that his face beamed with joy.

"Shivall! that's it," he cried rapturously. "Shure you are the broth of a bhoj, and it's what I'm brakiug my heart afther."

The boy spoke to the driver, and the driver spoke to the boy for some time. At length the boy said again, "You want one?"

"One! yes, plinty—more, for a lady," replied Mick, thinking the boy was alluding to the horse's tail, which was being smoothed down by the boy's hand.

The word "more" was the only one that they paid any attention to. He wanted a *cheval*, and he said he wanted it *mort*, which in French signifies dead, therefore they considered themselves justified in coming to the conclusion that he was in request of a dead horse. They did not stop to inquire what he wanted it for. Englishmen are proverbially eccentric in France, and they fancied he might want to eat it.

"You give money. Francois go fetch it," said the boy, pointing to the driver.

"Bring it here?" asked Mickey.

"Yes, *ici*."

"He see! All right. I suppose he knows a dale better where to get these things than me," replied Mickey Doolan.

"Give fifty franc," continued the boy.

Mickey took out his purse and handed the man two napoleons and a half.

Another man was called to attend to the carriage, and Francois, harnessing another horse to a stable cart, went off to an *abattoir* outside the barrier of St. Denis, to buy a dead horse.

"Whist, me jewel," said Mickey to the boy when they were alone, "Is there a dhrop of the crater to be had for love or money, it's bad to be dry, shure?"

He put his hand to his mouth as he spoke, and threw back his head to show that he wanted to drink. The lad comprehended him, and conducted him to an *estaminet*, in the same street, a few doors off, where, after trying several sorts of spirits, he determined to stick to the Genève, which he found more to his taste and like whiskey than anything else they had.

The boy had a glass of Cassis, which Mickey paid for. There was a pretty girl behind the counter, and Mickey cast many a tender glance in her direction.

"Tell her," he said to the boy, "that I'm a squireen in Ireland; my father's place is Kiltubby, away down in the wilds of Tipperary; a sweet purty place, to be shure. Tell her I should like to go a-coortin' her."

Gathering the sense of this as well as he could, Edouard, the boy, translated it, and the French girl smiled at Mick.

"Ask her what she'll have; and, I say, tell her if she'll give me a bit of ribbon out of her cap, I'll stick it in my own caubeen at the next fair."

The girl opened a bottle of *Ay mousseaux*, and Mick drank some of the champagne, which, mingling with the spirits, began to excite him strangely. He paid for the wine with his master's money, and ordered another bottle; after this he seized a Frenchman's stick, and, giving a true Irish screech, threw the stick in the air, caught it in the centre as it descended, and danced an

Irish jig ; much to the wonderment of the natives, who, in their wildest dreams had never dreamt of such a dance before.

Their astonishment became admiration, and when Mickey had finished, and sank exhausted into a chair, they applauded loudly.

"Tear an' ages," said Mick, "you needn't make such a hullabaloo about nothing. It's only a jig I've been giving yez. Och, murder! Irish! the poor belated creatures have never seen a jig before. I wish a few of them would come to a wake at Ballysmashem, we'd tache them what won Waterloo."

Mickey Doolan regarded them with sovereign contempt, not unmingled with pity ; but encountering the glance of the pretty girl again, his features softened, and he ordered another bottle of wine.

While this was going on, Scatterbrain had written a note to Madame Sartignes, which he despatched to the Rue Maurigny by a commissionaire. In it he said :—

"MY DEAR MADAME SARTIGNES.—I am inexpressibly sorry for what took place this morning. Perhaps I ought not to allude to it. I hope by so doing that I shall not renew your grief. In order to console you for the dreadful occurrence which must have been so intensely annoying to you, I have sent my man with a striking and novel present, which I feel certain will afford you the utmost possible pleasure and delight. It is the very finest that Paris can produce. I do assure you that I have spared no expense or trouble ; and if I can at any time serve you in any shape or way, I am, believe me, dear Madame, your obedient servant to command.

SCATTERBRAIN.

He thought this letter a model of elegant and vague composition. He flattered himself that he had with the utmost delicacy avoided speaking of the false hair which it was the custom of ladies to wear in an exaggerated degree, and he had succeeded at the same time in raising her curiosity to the very highest pitch.

Madame Sartignes did not guess what the present was. She could not guess, though she racked her brain for more than an hour in the vain effort to do so. Was it jewellery or bon-bons? Yes, it must be jewellery.

She posted herself at the window of the hotel in which she resided, and which commanded a view of the street, and there stood looking out for the arrival of Mickey Doolan with the present.

We must now return to Mick, who was getting very comfortably and respectably drunk in the *estaminet* of the *Poisson d'Or*. He kept all the frequenters of that highly respectable tavern in a roar of laughter, though they did not understand a word he said. His pantomime was inimitable. The billiard players even left off their eternal cannoning to look at Mickey Doolan, who, with his hat cockaded and stuck on one side, his tightly buttoned coat, leather breeches, and top boots, for he was dressed as a groom, presented a spectacle which was seldom seen in Paris. "You brew dacent stuff," said Mick, patronisingly, "I'll say that for ye, and give the devils their due"—here he sipped his champagne and winked at Rosine behind the counter—"but you've no notion of an Irish still. Poor haythens, how should ye? If father Connor, from Ballykilliby was to come amongst you, he'd open your poor desaved eyes for you. But its no use, you're all lost for not making whiskey. Give me a dhrop of photeen and an old dhudeen, and you may have all the Frenchified dhrinks and smhokes. Bah! I've no patience with the likes of yez. It's wastin' my time, I am on ye."

The boy Edouard now re-entered the room, which he had temporarily quitted, and gave him to understand that the man had arrived with his purchase.

Mick was in his glory, and did not feel in the humour to go up to the Rue Maurigny, so he counted out ten francs, and handing them to Edouard told him to give them to Francois to take the "prisint" to Madame de Sartignes, and gave him the paper with the address on it.

The boy stared, but supposing that there was nothing wrong or extraordinary in it, went away as requested to instruct Francois, who, nothing loth, went off

with the "prisint" to the hotel in the Rue Maurigy, while Mickey Doolan, seeing there was yet plenty of money in his master's purse, ordered in another bottle of vin Monsseaux, and drank the health of the Emperor crying loudly, "Veeve Lamperor."

"There's an iligant compliment for them," he said, smiling with satisfaction, "Shure it's the Irish bhoys that's the born gintlemen. See, now, me masther's after sendin' a rale handsome present to the French madame. Now, bhoys, Hurroo for ould Oirland."

His loud voice rang through the room with a power that made the glasses ring.

Francois in the meantime drove the dead horse, whose body he had in the cart, to the hotel in the Rue Maurigy.

He was in a very good temper, for he had made ten francs out of his bargain, and Edouard had just given him five more to go to the hotel in Mick's place, keeping the other for himself.

The horse was old, but it had died a natural death, and in the opinion of Francois was not to be despised as an ingredient and a help to soup, which he probably thought was its destination.

He drove right into the court yard of the hotel. It was just growing dark, the time spring, and the frequenters of the place were either sitting down or walking about smoking and drinking.

The advent of a dead horse lying in a cart with his head and fore paws hanging down behind created a sensation, as may be imagined.

The landlord went up to Francois, and indignantly demanded his business.

Francois imperturbably produced the paper Mickey Doolan had sent him, and giving it to the landlord demanded a *pour boire* with the utmost assurance in the world.

The address had been written on an envelope by his lordship, who had put his own name in the corner, in case Mick might make any absurd blunder, such as he actually did commit in the end.

There it was in black and white.

*à Madame de Sartignes,
Hotel Cristol,
51, Rue de Maurigny,
Faubourg St. Germain.*

With Lord Scatterbrain's compliments.

"Stop a bit," said the landlord, who went upstairs to Madame Sartignes.

"Ah!" she exclaimed, on seeing him, "you have something for me."

"Yes, Madame," answered the hotel keeper, dryly, and with difficulty restraining his indignation.

"*Ce cher Scatterbrain!*" she murmured ecstatically, adding, "give it to me, let them bring it up here."

"What, in your apartment, Madame?"

"Yes, at once."

The landlord nearly choked himself with surprise and rage.

"I'll have it put in a stable, and you can have it a bit at a time, Madame," he said, at length.

"No, no, all at once," cried Madame Sartignes, who did not comprehend his meaning in the least.

The landlord, perfectly thunderstruck, sank against the wall. He had been an hotel keeper now for fifteen years, and never before had any lady, in his experience, asked for the whole of a dead horse to be brought into her private apartments.

The thing was unheard of, unprecedented, preposterous. He could not possibly consent to it, and recovered himself sufficiently to say so.

"No, Madame," he exclaimed, "If you have such appetites you must go elsewhere. I, Adolphe Cristol, say it to you."

"What do you mean, Monsieur," she demanded in her turn, surprised.

"Mean, Madame! why this," answered M. Cristol, warming as he proceeded, "someone has sent you a dead horse, Madame. It is now in my court-yard, and you ask me deliberately to bring it up all at once into your apartments, when I have said that you can have it by bits, as long as it will keep good. No, Madame, I cannot

comply with such a request, you must go and eat your horse elsewhere. I will not have such gross appetites satisfied in the Hotel Cristol, which has always borne an irreproachable name."

"A horse, did you say, a dead horse?" gasped Madame de Sartignes.

"Look for yourself, Madame. It's in the court-yard."

Uttering a shriek, Madame de Sartignes fell forward on the ground in a swoon.

By accident one of her brothers, who was a gay, fire-eating fellow, in a foot-regiment, came to see her. The state of the case was quickly explained to him, and he burned with a rage which he took no trouble to conceal.

First of all he seized Francois' whip, and so belaboured him with it over the shoulders, that he was glad to make his escape, but before he did so, he gave the dead horse a shove and made it fall out of the cart on to the pavement of the court-yard.

Here was a fresh embarrassment for the proprietor of the Hotel Cristol. Unfortunate man. The episode threatened to ruin him. The most extravagant rumours flew about the neighbourhood. Some neighbours, who had looked in at the gates and seen the body of the horse, declared that they had always suspected him of using horse-flesh on a large scale in the kitchen.

The horse was a great fact. He could not get rid of it. Where was he to put it? What could he do with it?

In a frenzy of despair, he sought Madame de Sartignes' apartment, and found her alone with her brother, into whose willing ear she was pouring the piteous tale of her wrongs.

"Madame," exclaimed M. Cristol, with tears in his eyes, "I implore you to remove your horse."

"Blockhead," said the Lieutenant, "it is yours, do what you like with it."

"Mine! I would give a thousand francs to anyone who would relieve me of it."

Lieutenant Sartignes dismissed the unhappy proprietor in a curt manner, and told him to do what he liked or what he could, and to go to the devil.

This was a wide choice, and M. Cristol, after some consideration, employed a man to cart the obnoxious thing off to an *abattoir*, there to be left until someone who had occasion for such articles came to buy it.

Madame Sartignes said, with tears in her eyes, to her brother—

“Victor, you see how I have been insulted, will you not avenge me?”

“To the last drop of my blood,” he answered, valiantly.

“Call, then, at once upon this milor—this Scatterbrain—and demand satisfaction.”

“He sent you a horse, my dear sister, I shall take him a horsewhip,” replied the lieutenant.

Madame rose, and kissed him.

“You were always such a good boy,” she said.

“Wait for my return,” he replied.

Putting on his hat, Lieutenant Sartignes hired a *fiacre*, and started for Scatterbrain’s hotel, burning to insult him in a still more outrageous way, if possible, than he had, as he fancied, insulted his sister.

Mickey Doolan had brought about a very complicated state of affairs.

CHAPTER LVII.

THE FANCY BALL.

“I HAVE always thought I should like to marry a Frenchwoman,” observed Jack Fulford.

“Why?” asked Scatterbrain, who always liked a reason.

They were sitting over their wine, after dinner, in a private room at their hotel, and Jack was looking over a box of cigars, to see which one of its numerous contents was best suited to his fastidious fancy.

“I think Frenchwomen,” answered Jack, “are more

vivacious than our countrywomen. They are always gay and sprightly."

"But not so domesticated."

"I grant that, but who in the name of goodness wants a domesticated wife, except a farm labourer or city clerk? A poor man always likes to have his wife at home, because she is a sort of drudge, and can look after the children and all that, but a rich man likes a wife who does not mind going out, who can bear the fatigue, and be a shining light in society."

"I suppose so," replied Scatterbrain, with the air of a man who has not made up his mind on the subject.

"That little Sartignes is very nice."

"Very," said Scatterbrain.

"I almost forget Florence when I think of her."

"Do you?"

This was said abstractedly.

A servant entered at this juncture.

"A visitor for Milor," he said.

"His name," demanded Scatterbrain.

"M. de Sartignes, Lieutenant 1st Chasseurs à pied," said a voice at the door.

And the lieutenant entered.

"Jack, speak to him, will you?" said Scatterbrain.

"He is from his sister, I suppose."

Fulford, who spoke French very well, said, "We are very glad to see you, although we have not yet had the honour of being introduced to you. Your sister, I suppose, is the good-natured lady to whom we are indebted for the pleasure of your society."

"I have come from my sister-in-law, sir, Madame Theophile de Sartignes."

"You are extremely welcome. Will you take a glass of wine?"

"I have come, sir, to demand an explanation, if any explanation is possible."

"From whom?"

"Milor Scatterbrain."

The lieutenant controlled his passion as well as he able, though he experienced great difficulty in doing so.

"Ask him what I've done, Jack," said Scatterbrain ; "I'll swear I never gave the woman any encouragement if he has come to demand the nature of my intentions."

"My friend, Lord Scatterbrain, cannot speak your language, and I shall be glad to transmit anything you have to say to him," began Jack Fulford.

"He has grossly insulted my sister, sir. Here is a letter, in which he tells her that he will make her a present. Well, what is it, this present, when it comes ? a dead horse, sir. Ask him what he means by that."

Drawing a whip, with a thick thong, from under his coat, M. de Sartignes shook it threateningly in the air, adding, "Milor Scatterbrain sent us a horse, we bring him a horse-whip."

"What the deuce does he mean ?" enquired Jack.

"I don't know," replied Scatterbrain, amazed.

"He says you sent his sister a dead horse."

"It's that fellow Mick."

"What has he done now ?"

"My horse this morning pulled off Madame de Sartignes' chignon in the *Bois*. I sent Mick out to buy the best in Paris, and take it to her house ; how he could have blundered I don't know, but I will lay a sovereign to a penny piece, that it is the result of his stupidity. What do you think ?"

"There is no doubt about it. Now let me talk to this fiery Frenchman, or he will be doing or saying something which will necessitate our shying him out of the window, which would be unpleasant to him, and probably disagreeable in its results to us."

Addressing the Lieutenant, Jack Fulford entered into an explanation, assuring him in the most explicit terms that no offence whatever was intended to his sister, to whom, as a reparation for the accident of the morning, a chignon, and not a horse, was sent.

M. de Sartignes received this explanation with courtesy, but did not seem completely satisfied. Determining to have the matter cleared up, Scatterbrain rang the bell, and asked if his man had come in.

The reply was in the affirmative, but a smile was apparent on the waiter's face as he made the answer.

"Send him up," said Scatterbrain.

A heavy step was soon afterwards heard on the stairs, and Mickey Doolan, with unsteady movements entered the drawing-room. He tried to look sober, but by no possibility could he succeed.

"You have been drinking, you vagabond," said Jack Fulford.

"Leave him to me, Jack, if you please," said Scatterbrain, "you don't understand my countrymen, you may lead but by God you can't drive them, and Mick here would as soon knock you down, and risk the consequences, as he would anyone else who insulted him."

"Insult a servant!"

"Why not? Have they not feelings? Were not the Irish peasantry the original lords of the soil, till dispossessed by conquest, and can they ever forget that or forgive the Southron but leave him to me. Mick!"

"Your honour," promptly replied the delinquent.

"Did you do what I told you?"

"Shure and I did, your honour. I bought as fine a Shceval as ever you sec in your life. They asked me how much it was, pointing to the horse's tail, and I said 'more,' and by this time Madam's got a beautiful sheeval more, or may eternal purgatory be my portion, and that's a bitter wish any way."

"He has got confused," said Scatterbrain, "I will extract the whole story from him to-morrow."

"Plaze your honour," began Mick.

"You can go now."

"But—"

"Be off you omadhoun, or be jabers I'll quicken your movements," and Scatterbrain, who reserved to himself a privilege in which he would allow no one to participate, and that was abusing his valet.

Mick went away grumbling, and was, in a few minutes, the pet of the servants' hall at the hotel, where he had made himself a universal favourite by his agreeable conduct to the females, and his good-natured way of hob-nobbing with the men.

Lieutenant Sartignes condescended at last to accept a cigar and a glass of claret. The wine happened to be

La Fitte, of a good vintage, which further improved his temper, and he finally concluded by saying, if Lord Scatterbrain would come to the Hotel Cristol at once, and explain to his sister and the landlord that his servant had been guilty of an error, he should be satisfied.

This Scatterbrain willingly consented to do.

A carriage was ordered, and the three gentlemen proceeded to the Faubourg St. Germain, where they found the Hotel Cristol. The proprietor was asked to accompany them upstairs to the room of Madame de Sartignes, which he did.

There, in the most handsome way, Scatterbrain, through the instrumentality of Fulford, explained all that had happened, and expressed his deep regret that his man should have been such a fool.

The hotel keeper was delighted. Madame was enchanted, and muttered to herself, "Oh! *ce cher* Scatterbrain." The Lieutenant ordered some of the Cristol La Fitte, and a couple of hours were passed very pleasantly.

Much laughter was expended over Mickey Doolan's mistake about the *cheval mort*, and when that subject was exhausted, and everyone was satisfied that it was but a joke, the result of an ignorance of the language, added to a national aptitude for blundering, which, whether rightly or wrongly, Irishmen have the credit of possessing, conversation flowed into general channels.

A lady, well known in the fashionable world, had lately given a fancy ball, which had been a great success.

"I do wish Lord Scatterbrain would give a ball," said Madame de Sartignes.

"Bachelors cannot indulge in such luxuries," he replied, laughing.

"Oh, yes," she exclaimed. "Hire some public room, organise a committee of ladies, and let them manage everything. When is your fête day—that is, your birthday?"

It was in a few days, and he said so.

"Ah, well, there it is," she rejoined, "you give a

fancy ball on your fête day. I will arrange your committee, and all you will have to do will be——"

"Pay the bills," suggested Jack Fulford.

"Not altogether," answered Madame, "that is nothing with you milors. He will receive his company, and make himself agreeable to those he likes best."

Here madame favoured his lordship with a most fascinating glance.

"What does she say, Jack?" asked Scatterbrain.

Fulford told him, and his lordship returned her amorous glance with interest.

They parted with the brother and sister on the most friendly terms, and the disagreeable episode of the afternoon was forgotten.

When they were going home Jack Fulford exclaimed, "If you don't part with that man of yours you deserve all that will happen to you."

"He will improve," replied Scatterbrain.

"Not he."

"I will give him a chance. At all event she means well."

"That is always a fool's excuse," growled Fulford.

"My dear Jack," said Scatterbrain, firmly but civilly, "I am quite capable of managing my own affairs, and don't want your interference, however kindly it may be meant, and however valuable it may be to a poor devil not very well up in the ways of the world, like me."

"I protest——"

"Not a word. Bring me a weed, if you have one, and tell the driver to stop at the *Café de Varieties*, or Tortoni's."

The discussion ended there, and so determined had been Scatterbrain's manner that his friend did not attempt to dictate to him again.

The story of Mickey Doolan's misadventure had got about and Miss La Valliere made merry over her rival's discomfiture. Madame was burning to be revenged, and she thought she would have an excellent opportunity, when the invitations to the fancy ball were given.

Scatterbrain hired the most elegant room in Paris for the entertainment, and the issuing of the invitations was left entirely to Madame Sartignes and her brother.

They resolved to ask Miss Valliere, but at the same time they were desirous of playing her a trick.

She had a suitor for her hand, an elderly man, who had but one eye, and whom she detested most cordially.

This was the Count de Fanchon.

Madame de Sartignes could imitate handwriting tolerably well, and she wrote a note a few days before the ball, to Miss Valliere, which purported to come from Scatterbrain, asking the young lady to dress in Babylonian costume, and to look out for one who would be attired as a Mandarin duck, with feathers of gaudy hue, and who had had a mask made expressly in order the better to carry out his eccentric character.

Madame's next care was to write as if from La Valliere to the amorous old nobleman, telling him to be careful to notice a lady dressed in the Babylonian costume, and asking him as a special favour to dress as a Mandarin Duck, with bill, wings, web feet, &c. "Then," concluded this precious epistle, "Two fond hearts will meet, and have a chance of conversing privately. Your devoted Blanche has always loved you, but for reasons which she will explain on the night of the ball, she has been obliged to hide her real sentiments. I kiss your hands, and long for the time to come when we shall meet, as ardently as you can long to meet the Babylonian.

"P.S.—Do not call at my father's house. I have my reason for asking this."

The evening for the ball arrived, and with it much heart-burning and anxiety.

Blanche Valliere had been to all the costumiers in Paris, and not one of them had ever heard of the Babylonian costume. It was something entirely new. But one more enterprising than the rest, and who would never allow that he was defeated, refused to give in as the others had done, and promised her the dress by a certain time.

It came home at four o'clock on the eventful day, and was the most extraordinary combinations of colours—lace, fringe, spangles, and beads,—that can possibly be imagined. The head-dress was a work of art. It represented the building of the Tower of Babel. There was

the scaffolding, the little men at work going up and down ladders. It was complete, but most uncomfortable to wear. She was obliged to keep her head upright when it was fixed on, for fear if she looked down it might topple over, which would have been dreadful. This saved her from looking at herself though, which was charitable, as she must have perished with timidity to know how her extraordinary costume would be received in the ball-room. Nothing more grotesque can be imagined than her appearance in this strange guise. She walked with a stately step, head erect and towering above all others, the observed of all observers.

"What is that?" said one.

"Heaven save us, what does all this mean?" asked another. M. de Sartignes, the incarnation of mischief, glided about from one to the other saying, "That is the Babylonian costume. Is it not great?"

"After that the deluge," observed a philosopher.

Scarcely had Blanche entered the ball-room than Count de Fanchon walked in. He was very nervous, but gave a slight flap with his wings, one of which came in contact with a screen and broke, being disabled for the rest of the evening, much to his chagrin. The count was very striking as a Mandarin duck, and his costumier had done him justice, though the character of a goose would have better become him.

Whispering to one near him he asked which was the Babylonian.

Blanche was quickly pointed out to him, and he advanced towards her with all the assurance imaginable. Her face, pale enough hitherto, flushed with pleasure now, for she thought the founder of feast was coming to give her his hand and countenance.

Offering her his arm, which she took, the count exclaimed, "My fair Babylonian, this is happiness."

He was unconscious of the tittering which ran all around the room, as these eccentrics stood in the centre of the people, the cynosure of all eyes.

"Oh," said Blanche, knowing by his voice that it was not Scatterbrain to whom she was speaking.

"What is the matter, sweetest of angels?" asked the enraptured count.

"You are not Milor. I have been deceived. Take me home, or I shall go into hysterics. I know I shall," said Blanche.

The word Milor opened the count's eyes. He began to see that there was some trick or mistake in all this, of which they were the victims, and he was confirmed in this suspicion by the loud laughter and rude comments which were audible all over the room.

He did not know how to act.

Blanche's eyes wandered in a direction which revealed to her a scene she found fatal to her peace.

Not far from where she was standing, was a Cavalier of the time of Charles the second, talking in an animated manner to a pretty shepherdess in Watteau costume. They were laughing loudly, as if enjoying some excellent joke.

These were Madame de Sartignes and Lord Scatter-brain.

"Oh, catch me," exclaimed Blanche de Valliere.

The Count tried to throw out his wings, but one was broken, and this impeded the action of his right arm. He extended the left as Blanche fell gracefully back. The Tower, cleverly put on as it was, rolled off; she had not thought of this, and the catastrophe was complete.

No one could render any assistance for laughing, and the Count, unable to bear this ridicule any longer, took off his wings in a rage, and carrying, Blanche in his arms, conveyed her to an ante-room and from thence to his carriage, when she was sufficiently recovered to be able to walk.

This adventure ended well for the Count, as Blanche, for very shame, gave him her hand, and they were married. Thus Madame Sartignes had her revenge upon her rival, and put her out of the way very cleverly indeed.

She told Scatterbrain the story, at which he laughed immoderately, though he became grave afterwards, thinking that some friend of the lady's would call him out, for being in some way concerned in the matter,

though he was really as innocent as a child, and knew nothing whatever about the trick until the Babylonian and the Duck met one another in the ball-room.

The ball was acknowledged by all to be a great success, and Scatterbrain went home delighted. Mickey Doolan met him in the passage with a small box, a letter in an envelope not bearing a direction, and a candle.

"What have you got there, Mick?" asked his lordship.

"Shure, your honour, a man gave it me in the courtyard, just now, saying, 'Give this to your master at once;' and here it is for you."

Taking the note, he hastily tore it open, and read these lines, which had been quickly written, and evidently in a hurry; they were scrawled in pencil: "Start at once with the accompanying despatches for the British Embassy at Turin. (Signed) Cowley"

"This is odd," said Scatterbrain to himself, "I have no intimate acquaintance with his lordship, though I have paid my respects to him more than once. He does me great honour. I am proud to think that I have been singled out for this task, which is doubtless one of the utmost importance. It is a pity Jack is not in, I would consult him."

Fulford, who was fond of high play, had gone to a gaming house, and would not probably be home all night.

"Get a Bradshaw, Mick," said Scatterbrain, placing the letter in his pocket, and taking the little Russian leather bag in his hand; "we must be off by the first train."

"Och, murther! and where will we be goin', your honour?" cried Mickey Doolan, astonished.

"To Italy."

"Saints save us! Is it a foine counthry, yer honour?"

"There isn't another like it, save Ireland. Just pack up a travelling valise. I shall only take what I absolutely require."

Finding that the first train started at six o'clock, Scatterbrain looked at his watch. It was then half-past four. He ordered the cook, who had to be roused for

the purpose, to devil some bones for him, although very tired, resolved to sleep when he got into the train.

The honour the English ambassador at Paris had done him in selecting him to go to Turin with despatches elated him immensely.

"I should not wonder," he said to himself, "if this is to try me. If I do it well, they'll make me a diplomatist."

Scatterbrain a diplomatist!

He had to thank Mickey Doolan for more than occurred to him at that particular moment.

CHAPTER LVIII.

THE DIPLOMATIC JOURNEY.

SCATTEBRAIN left a hurriedly-written note for Jack Fulford, telling him that he was obliged to go to Italy at a moment's notice, on business of a secret nature, of the utmost importance, which he would explain on his return.

Hastening to the station, his lordship caught a train just about to start, and, having a genuine liking for Mickey Doolan, he took two first-class tickets, as far as the company's service extended, and told his faithful retainer that he might travel with him.

Mick was delighted with this honour. With an English noble or gentleman this would have been impossible, but Scatterbrain's early training must be taken into consideration, and also his fondness for his countrymen, which was considerable; although for a time, he was amongst the ranks of the numerous absentee land-owners who form the chief curse of Ireland.

For a wonder, on a French railway, they obtained a *coupé* to themselves, the French companies being very chary of using more rolling stock than is absolutely necessary; and having ideas respecting the economy of

space which may be profitable to them, but which is anything but agreeable to their travelling patrons.

Mick had provided a bottle of whiskey, a cup, and a box of cigars, which he unpacked as soon as the train started.

They were to make a clear run of two hours before their first stoppage, it being an express. Holding up the bottle, Mick exclaimed, "Shure, yer honour won't forget the potheen. It's the morning dhrop that wouldn't hurt the sowl of an angel."

His lordship was of the same opinion; he had been up late the night before; he had drunk more champagne than usual; and his head was a chaos of confused ideas. He knew he was a diplomat. The greatness had been thrust upon him. Malvolio could not have been prouder than was he. Madame de Sartignes had smiled most pleasantly upon him, but she was excluded at present from consideration, owing to the strange occurrence of Lord Cowley sending him post-haste to Turin.

Lighting a cigar, he said to his trusty follower, "See Mick what it is to have a head on one's shoulders. The British ambassador's singled me out from all of thim to go this journey."

"Faith, yer honour's fortune's made!" exclaimed Mick, with enthusiasm.

"Who knows? I may become a great statesman. We all want a little training first, Lord Cowlew knows that. Oh! Mick, and it's the discerning man he is. How many times has he seen my face? Not more than twice. But he says to himself, says my lord, 'That's the fellow for me.'"

"Small blame to him, your honour."

"I think I shall do his choice credit; I'm not the man to blunder over anything. It's keep a clear head and know what you're going to do; that's my motto."

"Begorra, it's a fine thing to have a little larning, and be a—a—what did your honour call it?"

"A diplomatist, Mick. I'll explain the meaning of that word to you, Mick; a diplomatist or diplomat is a man whose tact enables him to tell white lies there's

no sin in, and make his listeners think it the truth. It's all lying, Mick."

"Shure it's an awful thrade that your honour," replied Mickey Doolan, crossing himself.

"The honour of it is in the lying. If you can't lie, it's no use trying to be a diplomatist," answered Scatterbrain, sagely.

"I wouldn't thry for all the peat in the bogs of Balnamuckey."

"You're a poor crayture, Mick. I can see you've no taste for high life," exclaimed Scatterbrain, contemptuously. "but where's the bag? I shall go to sleep, and I must have the bag with the papers under my head, that's the way a good diplomat always thravels, Mick. I've read that in books."

"Is it the bag wid the papers, your honour manes?" guessed Mick, looking around and scratching his head.

"Yes. I gave it you."

"Av coorse, your honour gave it me. But is it the bag wid the—"

"There was only one bag you omadhoun," said Scatterbrain, growing angry.

"Divil fly away wid me," grunted Mickey Doolan, whose perplexity increased every moment.

"Where's the bag?"

"Is it the diplomatic bag, your honour?"

"Yes, yes. Give it me."

"The curse of Crummell on the bag," muttered Mickey, in despair.

"Don't you know where you pnt it," impatiently demanded Scatterbrain.

"I know well enough, your honour."

"Bring it out, then. I was afraid you had forgotten it, or that it was lost, through your stupidity. That would have been a pleasant thing, wouldn't it, Mick?"

"Be Jabers, it would be that same," said Mick.

"Ha, ha! a good joke," laughed Scatterbrain.

"He! he!" laughed Mick, very dismally.

"They'd have said it was just like an Irishman, to start widout his luggage."

"Shure, and the spalpeens always talk against the

ould counthry, your honour, when it's got just the finest pisantry in the worl'd."

"But where's the bag? Come Mick, you're a long time producing it."

"Well thin, your honour, I'll be a diplomatic. It's under the seat."

"Where?"

"There. Let it bide your honour, it's safe enough."

"Get it out, you silly gossoon," said Scatterbrain.

"I wouldn't touch it your honour, if you'd give me all the goold in Dublin. I'm afraid of it, and that's no word of a lie."

Scatterbrain said something not very complimentary in its nature to Mickey Doolan, and, getting up, began to look for it himself.

"Oh! tear and ages," muttered Mick, "he'll find me out. Och! murther. It's the devil's own mess I'm in."

"Why, you thief of the world," exclaimed Scatterbrain, rising, after an ineffectual search, "it's not here. What have you done with it?"

"I ask your honour's pardon, but it must have stayed at the hotel, beyant there, in the city," answered Mick, trembling.

"What did you tell me a lie for, you murderin' villain?"

"I thought I be a diplomatic, your honour, and shure it was your honour that tould me it was all lying."

In spite of the chagrin under which he was labouring, Scatterbrain could not help smiling at this ingenious excuse on the part of Mickey Doolan, whose native wit on this occasion got him out of a serious scrape.

"What'll his lordship, the ambassador, say? that's what vexes me," said Scatterbrain. "However, there's no help for it, we must get back to Paris and see after this precious bag. I wish I'd seen after it myself, you beast of the universe."

"Och! holy angels," said Mickey indignantly, "and is it me mother's son that's lived to be called the bhaste of the universe?"

It was with some difficulty that his master could

pacify him, and when he did, Mick with a sly chuckle, said to himself, "If I had'n't been angry wid him, shure I'd never have heard the last of the bag, bad cess to it."

At the first station they got out, and taking fresh tickets, started on the back track for the city of the Sybarites, which they had just left.

CHAPTER LIX.

CAPTAIN SAUNDERS.

JACK FULFORD did not reach the hotel until after Scatter-brain had started for Turin. After the fancy ball he had accepted an invitation to supper, the hostess being none other than the charming Madame de Sartignes, who, desperate flirt and coquette that she was, played with the affections of the Irish peer and his intimate friend at the same time.

Fulford had no compunctions of conscience. It was a favourite saying of his, "All is fair in love and war," and, as honest chroniclers, we must admit that he acted up to the well-known adage.

It happened that a Captain Saunders who lodged in the hotel, came home at the same time. He, also, had been making a night of it. Neither of them were exactly sober. In the passage Captain Saunders lost his way. The only light was that showed by a small jet of gas. In his confusion, Captain Saunders ran up against Jack Fulford, who immediately began to abuse him in choice English, calling him a stupid French fool.

"Sir!" exclaimed Captain Saunders, "I am an Englishman, and I shall not allow such language as you have used to me to pass unnoticed."

"You may do what you please," replied Fulford.

"Here is my card. I demand yours," exclaimed the Captain.

Fulford, with an unsteady hand, took the card, and after much fumbling found one of his own, as he

thought, in his waistcoat pocket. This he gave to the Captain, with some incoherent observation of an ulterior nature.

Captain Saunders took the card, and with a bow passed on.

In course of time he found the way to his room, and rolling on the bed, dressed as he was, instantly fell into a profound sleep.

The card which Fulford had given to the warlike captain chanced to be one of Scatterbrain's. How it got into his pocket he never could tell. He must have put it there in mistake, thinking it was his own.

It was quite late in the day when Captain Saunders woke, with a headache and a confused recollection of the events of the preceding night. He had been insulted. He could remember that. But by whom? The card which he had laid on the table in his bedroom stared him in the face. He looked at it.

Viscount Scatterbrain.

It was then an English nobleman with whom he had come in contact. No matter. Had it been the Emperor himself he would have demanded an explanation and an apology. He was a determined fire-eater, and having acquired that reputation amongst his friends it was necessary that he should keep it up.

Some brandy and soda restored his shattered nerves, and a devilled chicken further invigorated him. Looking at his watch he found that it was nearly four o'clock. He had slept the best part of the day. Such is the penalty we pay for trifling with the night. Dressing himself with scrupulous care, he rang the bell, and inquired if Lord Scatterbrain was in the hotel.

The domestic went away, presently returning with the news that his lordship had just come in, but was about to start again for Turin in an hour's time—that is to say, as soon as he partaken of some slight refreshment.

The captain sent in his card, with a message to the

following effect: He would have the pleasure of waiting upon Lord Scatterbrain in ten minutes.

"Turin," he muttered to himself, as he put the finishing touch to his moustache with some *pomade Hongroise*, "I wonder what the deuce takes him to Turin. Has he heard that I am a duellist, and does he want to escape me? It is a wonder I have not been sent off to Italy. Those dispatches I expect are a long time coming.

Scatterbrain had just come back from the station, after the precious black bag, intending to start off again by the evening mail, as he was afraid of getting into disgrace with his new patron, the ambassador, if he wasted any more time.

Not knowing anyone of the name of Captain Saunders, he was somewhat anxious to know what that person might have to say to him.

Jack Fulford, thoroughly knocked up with his excesses of the night before, was not yet visible. Mickey Doolan, who had been sent to his room by his master to inquire for him, had beaten a rapid retreat before the combined attack of a soda-water bottle and a bootjack, which had been hurled at him by Jack, whose aversion Mick was at all times, and more especially when he wanted to go to sleep.

His lordship was sipping some champagne, and eating a slice of dry cake when Captain Saunders, bowing very stiffly, was ushered in by a French waiter. On a sofa lay the bag.

"To what am I indebted for the honour of this visit?" asked Scatterbrain, blandly.

"I am surprised that you should put such a question to me, my lord," answered the Captain.

"Why so?"

"You have my card."

"Yes," said Scatterbrain, twisting it about in his hand.

"My name is Saunders."

"So I perceive."

"I hold a commission in Her Majesty's service, and I am a Queen's messenger."

"That may be very interesting to your friends," answered Scatterbrain; "but, by the powers, I don't see what it has to do with me at all, at all."

"You must have been very far gone, last night, if you don't remember insulting me most grossly. If that is the case, I shall be glad to accept your apology, and there the matter shall end."

"Far gone!" repeated his lordship, elevating his eyebrows in genuine astonishment. "Faith! and it was myself that was perfectly sober. I never saw you before sir, and you are either amusing yourself at my expense, or it is evident you are labouring under a mistake."

"Perhaps you will say you did not give me your word," said Captain Saunders.

"Certainly I did not."

"How then did it come into my possession?" asked the Captain, brandishing it triumphantly before his face.

"My good sir, how can I tell?" rejoined his lordship, "you might produce my watch, and put the same question to me."

"My lord, this language is unpardonable."

"Sir, this intrusion upon privacy is unwarrantable."

"You refuse to make an apology," thundered the Captain, growing red in the face with anger.

"For what?"

"I have already sufficiently explained."

"When I have done nothing wrong; when, in fact, I have never seen you before, I can possibly do nothing of the sort."

"You shall hear from me."

"I have no wish to do so," answered Scatterbrain, warming in his turn. "I have seen enough of you, and my opinion is that, if you are not mad, you are a most offensive person, repulsive to the last degree. I am an Irishman, but if you think I am to be played upon on that account, you are grievously mistaken. I must request you to leave my room, sir, or"—

He hesitated.

"Well, my lord, 'or'!"—exclaimed Captain Saunders,

crossing his arms defiantly over his breast, and waiting for the conclusion of the sentence.

"I shall think that you have neither good breeding or acquired courtesy," said Scatterbrain.

"Very well, then, you shall be undeceived; though I must confess that I think you deficient in both respects," said Captain Saunders. "A friend will wait on you in my behalf, and we can fight either in the Bois, or on the frontier, as may be arranged."

Scatterbrain trembled; not because he was a coward, but he had no knowledge of weapons of defence, nor any experience in duelling. He turned pale, and the Captain saw it.

In leaving the room, the Captain had to pass the sofa on which the bag was lying.

It caught his eye. He stopped abruptly. His countenance reflected the most acute surprise, and in a lively voice, he ejaculated, "Hallo!"

"Very impertinent fellow, this," thought Scatterbrain, rising nervously, as he saw the Captain's eye fixed on the precious bag; adding, still *sotto voce*, "be jabbers, if he thinks he's going to have my bag, he's counted without his host."

"Really, sir, this conduct—" he began.

"Where did you get that bag?" exclaimed Captain Saunders, loudly, interrupting him.

"That's my business."

"On the contrary, it is mine."

"Mick," said Scatterbrain to his trusty follower, who had remained in a corner of the room, under pretence of brushing a hat.

"Your honour," said Mick.

"Turn this man out."

Mickey Doolan approached the valourous captain in some trepidation.

"Shure, your honour will see"—he began.

"You will see—stars," cried the captain, striking out heavily.

Mick rolled over and over, until he reached his corner, where he lay, howling.

"Och, murther! wurroo!" he said, in lachrymose accents; "shure, it's kilt intirely I am."

Captain Saunders seized the bag, and held it tightly under his arm.

"Put down my bag," said Scatterbrain, flushing angrily.

"Prove your right to it," was the answer.

"Didn't his excellency, the British ambassador send it here to me, and isn't it meself that's going to take it to Turin?" rejoined Scatterbrain.

"You!"

This was uttered in a tone of concentrated irony and contempt.

"Me; Viscount Scatterbrain, of Ballysmashem Castle, Ireland. Is there anything wonderful in that, ye ill-mannered spalpeen?"

"This bag is mine. It is I who am to take it to Turin. You must give an account of yourself, my lord. It's my opinion that you are no more a lord than I am, but some impudent swindler. This is an affair for the police."

Scatterbrain, overcome by the audacity of this speech, sank back in a chair.

Captain Saunders was taking his departure in triumph; when in the doorway, he ran up against Jack Fulford, who had risen at last, and nearly upset that gentleman's equilibrium.

"My friend," said Fulford, in a tone of deep disgust, recognising the stranger of the preceding night, "it seems to me that you have a talent for running up against people."

"What's the meaning of this?" enquired the Captain, puzzled.

"It means that you have knocked the breath out of my body, and you haven't the decency to apologise."

"Who are you?"

"Mr. John Fulford, at your service."

"And this man," cried Scatterbrain, starting up and recovering himself, "is the most impudent scoundrel that ever entered a gentleman's room without being invited. Stop him, Jack; he's got my bag."

Fulford interposed his body to bar the Captain's egress.

"Now, Sir," he exclaimed, "explain all this."

It would have been difficult for the Captain to do so, as he stood in need of an explanation as much as anybody.

"Your friend, if he is your friend," he said, pointing to Scatterbrain, "and if so I can't congratulate you on your acquaintance, is trying to personate me."

"How?"

"He declares that Lord Cowley has sent the despatches contained in this bag—which is emphatically *my* bag—to him, and that he has received orders to go at once to Turin with them."

"And why not?"

"Because I am a Queen's messenger, and this bag is my property. If you don't believe me, come at once to the embassy, and I can prove who I am."

"That's fair," said Jack Fulford, "decidedly, that's fair. I don't understand the matter a bit, and can't possibly say which is right and which is wrong."

"You are a gentleman, and a man of sense," said Captain Saunders, much relieved.

"I will go too; we will all go," said Scatterbrain.

"I must distinctly refuse to have anything to do with the wild Irishman. With you I can talk," said Saunders.

"Wild Irishman," repeated Scatterbrain, whose rage knew no bounds, "faith, if I had ye within reach of me fist, I'd knock ye into Smithareens, so that ye wouldn't tetch a silver sixpence at a rag fair."

"Be quiet," said Jack Fulford, "there is some mistake here, I can see. The gentleman and I will go to the embassy, and have it cleared up."

Scatterbrain was obliged to be satisfied with this arrangement, and sat down again, his brain in a whirl, and fearing that his glory as a diplomatic agent was slowly but surely departing from him.

CHAPTER LX.

A STRANGE ADVENTURE.

MICKEY DOOLAN picked himself up and beat a retreat, consoling himself down-stairs with a "dhrop of the crater," not being a physical force man, though he could handle a shillaleh as well as anyone in a crowd, he deprecated a second attack from Captain Saunders's powerful fist.

In about half an hour, Jack Fulford returned alone.

"You've made a pretty blunder," he exclaimed, as he entered the room.

"How?" said Scatterbrain, who felt that he was in the wrong somehow.

"Of course you have. Captain Saunders is one of our first Queen's messengers, a man of high standing. How did you come to intercept his despatches, and think they were for you?"

"Some one gave them to Mick, and he brought them to me. The letter was unaddressed, and I did not see anything very extraordinary in the fact that our ambassador had singled me out as the bearer of the despatches."

Fulford burst into a loud laugh.

"That Irish servant of yours will verify my predictions. He will ruin you," he said.

"How did Saunders get my card?"

"We met last night, or rather this morning, and had an altercation. I must have given it him by mistake, though how I came by it, is more than I can tell."

"Where is the Captain now?"

"Off to Turin. They wouldn't let him come back. Those despatches were of the utmost importance. He asked me to make his respects and apologies to you."

"Heigho!" ejaculated Scatterbrain, with a deep sigh

"What's the matter now?" inquired Fulford.

"I thought I was going to be a diplomatist."

"And your aspirations are nipped in the bud," said Jack, laughing.

Then Scatterbrain told him, how he should by that time have been far on the way to Italy if Mickey Doolan had not made another blunder and left the bag behind, whereat Jack laughed more loudly than ever.

It was some time before Scatterbrain recovered his equanimity. He received an invitation during the following week to a ball at the Embassy, which he refused, as the story of his amateur diplomacy had got about, and he was afraid of being laughed at.

At the different clubs, the Jockey, Circle Imperial, The Union, and others it was a great joke. It had been published with suppressed names in the Figaro, and Scatterbrain did not like being made a butt for ridicule.

But he could not persuade himself to leave Paris, of which he was passionately fond.

He got on very well with Jack Fulford, who, however, assumed rather too much of the air of guardian and mentor. He was not content with being friend, he wanted to be philosopher and guide as well. This Scatterbrain secretly rebelled at, and nothing pleased him so much as to plan an excursion in the environs of Paris, elude the vigilance of Jack Fulford, take Mickey Doolan with him, and enjoy himself with his favoured follower and companion in his own quiet way.

Sometimes these excursions were productive of mirthful adventures, the most singular of which, was one that befel him at Versailles. He went there by train, and walked a long way into the country, so far indeed did he go that he lost himself, and his imperfect knowledge of French would not allow him to talk to any one sufficiently well to be directed into the right track. With Mickey Doolan by his side he wandered hither and thither until he was quite exhausted.

They had left the high road and were in a spacious

park, which would have passed muster very well in England as appertaining to a nobleman's domain.

The chateau loomed through the trees in the distance, and Scatterbrain being footsore and weary, resolved to go up to the house, present his card, and ask permission to rest awhile, as he could find neither town or hotel, where shelter was to be obtained.

Mick never travelled without a flask, but its contents had long been exhausted.

Occasionally he drew it from his pocket, and regarded it with a melancholy look, giving it a tight squeeze, which, however, did not suffice to extract a single drop of whiskey.

"This is worse than bogtrotting, Mick," observed his master.

"Faith, your honour, it's meself wishes I was back in ould Ireland again," replied Mick lugubriously.

Arriving at the chateau, which was named D'Asnieres, and belonging to an eccentric Englishman, Scatterbrain stated his business, and was asked to wait while the man consulted his master.

The chateau was of great age, and its antique towers were black and discoloured by the action of the weather. It presented a most venerable appearance, and never failed to command the sincere admiration of the antiquary.

It was in the possession of Sir Simon Chetwode. Sir Simon was a gentleman of the old school, very rich, fond of field sports, and having a mania.

It has been said, whether justly or not it is not our present province to determine, that every one is mad on some one point.

The baronet's mania was the renewal of hawking. To effect this he was indefatigable in his exertions. His influence with the gentry in the neighbourhood was sufficient to form a club, which was known as the Versailles Hawking Club. Sir Simon was Master of the Flight.

The stud of birds was numerous enough, and most of them were in training.

There were eight young falcons, three tiercels, six last year's falcons, three male and two female goshawks, three sparrowhawks, a few merlins and hobbies, several lanners sakers and peregrines from Tunis, and a certain number of buzzards and kestrels.

His son, Leonard, and his ward, Mac, cordially co-operated with him, and became quite accomplished at the sport.

Sir Simon Chetwode found his time so much taken up by his new pastime, that it was necessary to have a secretary to look after his correspondence, which, though not extensive, was sufficiently onerous to make great inroads on his time.

Accordingly, he wrote to his solicitor in Paris, who put an advertisement in a morning paper.

There were many applicants for the situation, but the solicitor being satisfied with his testimonials, selected Mr. John Sutcliffe, and told him to hold himself in readiness to set out for Versailles in a fortnight.

When the attorney's letters, notifying this fact arrived, Sir Simon had just returned from hawking, having enjoyed excellent sport. He wore the uniform which the club had adopted.

This, if a little fantastic, was at all event rich, elegant, and had the merit of being expensive. It consisted of a green hunting coat, red waistcoat, green breeches, red stockings, yellow leggings, and boots. The hat was of grey felt, in what is called XIII. style, cocked on one side, with the badges of the clubs and a tuft of heron haes, and was ornamented like the collars and sleeves of the coat and front of the waistcoat, with one line of silver between, two of gold for the master and the reverse for the men.

Taking up the letter, opening it hurriedly, and glancing over its contents, Sir Simon Montford, said, addressing his ward Mac --

"My secretary will arrive in a day or two. Will you see that his apartments are prepared. Mr. Solley informs me that he is highly respectable, and we may treat him as one of the family."

Mac promised to pay attention to this request. She

wondered what sort of a man the new comer would be. Her life was to a certain extent a lonely one. Sir Simon's friends were, for the most part, awkwardly polite to women, and infinitely preferred to sit over a bottle, and talk about field sports—their horses, their dogs, and their guns—than to yawn in a drawing-room, and listen to indifferent music.

When the servant told him a gentleman wished to see him he supposed it was his new secretary from Paris, and at once gave orders for him to be admitted. Mick remained in the hall, and Scatterbrain was ushered into a comfortable drawing-room, where were assembled the baronet, Sir Simon Chetwode, Mae, his pretty ward, Leonard, his son, and the Count Davignon, friend of the family.

In a few words Scatterbrain apologised for his visit, which was unavoidable, as he had lost his way, presented his card, begged permission to rest awhile, and finally requested that he might be sent to the nearest railway station.

Sir Simon was delighted to see him, and exclaimed, "I've been settled in this country now for ten years, my lord, and this is the happiest piece of luck which has befallen me. It is not often I get a countryman to visit me. My mother was Irish, so don't contradict. I see what is passing in your mind. Stop here and dine with me. Stop a week if you will, and you will be welcome."

Scatterbrain accepted this invitation with pleasure. Mickey Doolan was driven to the nearest *gare*, and told to proceed to Paris, and bring back such baggage as his master would require, and notify Jack Fulford of his absence and whereabouts.

Such a pleasant evening did his lordship spend with Sir Simon Chetwode and his guests and family, that he determined to remain for a few days, and enjoy the pleasures of hawking. The reason Sir Simon had left England, he found, was his dislike to it, after his wife's death. He went abroad to find relief, and let us charitably hope he succeeded.

Mae, his ward, was very pretty, and Leonard Chetwode

was in love with her. Scatterbrain, however, could see that the Count Davignon was also smitten with her charms.

Leonard, unlike his father, was heavy, ill-tempered, and sullen. Three days after Scatterbrain's arrival at the chateau, the Count Davignon went out. Leonard followed him with a loaded gun half an hour afterwards.

That day the Count was absent at dinner, and Leonard, appearing to remember something, said the Count had asked him to make his apologies, as he had been called suddenly to England.

Scatterbrain remarked that Leonard was agitated, and well he might be, for he had that day left the Count Davignon lying in a wood, with a charge of shot in his body; but that was a profound mystery to all save God and himself. He had ridded himself of a dangerous rival, but his conscience tormented him, and the only consolation he had was in the assurance that Mae loved him, though he knew she would turn from him with loathing and abhorrence if she was aware of his guilt.

Even Sir Simon Chetwode loved his ward. He had once thought of asking her to take the place of his dead wife, but this was before he knew that his son loved her.

Scatterbrain was quick enough to see that there was something on the mind of Leonard, but he was far from guessing the reality. Leonard told Scatterbrain in confidence that he should ask Mae to be his wife, and at once travel with her in the East, or elsewhere, as he was tired of the chateau of Asnieres.

Leonard Chetwode asked Mae to marry him, but she told him to wait a month for her answer. Scatterbrain returned to Paris, and accepting another invitation, was again at the chateau when the time came for her to give a reply. He took a great interest in her. Leonard took her for a walk, talking words of love, and insensibly thus approached the part of the wood where he had left Davignon weltering in his blood.

To his surprise there was no trace of a body. This was singular, as the murder had not been discovered, and he thought it buried for ever in the recesses of that

lonely wood. What could have become of it. Was not the Count dead? Would he rise up against him, a living witness, at an inconvenient interval?

Leonard Chetwode was like one in a dream. He gave Mae his arm as they walked home, and he answered her as she talked to him, but he did not know what they were talking about. He was wondering what had become of the Count, and tormented with a throng of doubts and fears.

Mae at length recalled him to a sense of his position by saying, almost with tears in her eyes, "You were so kind, just now, Leonard, why are you so distant and strange since then? Have I done anything to offend you? if so, in mercy, tell me, that I may make amends for my fault."

"You are an angel, Mae," he answered, "and I do not believe you will ever intentionally give me offence. It is my manner. I warned you that sometimes I could not keep off these fits of melancholy; they will seize upon me, do what I will to restrain them. Pray pardon me."

"I forgive you gladly, and I will strive to charm away your melancholy, as David did that of Saul, the king," she replied, with a bright smile.

They returned to the house, and Leonard told his father how he had spoken words of love to Mae, and she had consented to become his wife. This announcement fell upon the old man's heart like ice-cold water. He had expected it, but not so soon; and sometimes his fond, foolish heart would hope that something would happen which would keep them asunder. He bowed his head before the storm, and said, in a voice that quivered with emotion, he hoped they might be happy, and when they were both together, he formally gave them his blessing.

It was arranged that they should not be married yet. Mae said she should like the ceremony to take place when all nature was glad, and when the earth brought forth her increase, so she chose the merry month of June, when the roses were in bloom; April and May had to pass, for March was just in its decline. The

lovers went on dreaming of a happiness almost perfect in its way, which would be theirs soon. Leonard had nearly ceased to think of Count Davignon. Whatever mystery might surround his death, he did not care to occupy his mind with it, and for this reason: he sincerely believed him to be dead, and removed from his path for ever; but events were about to happen which induced him to modify this decided opinion, and entertain grave doubts upon the subject. April was drawing to a close, when, in the afternoon, Leonard was walking along the road which led from the lodge at the entrance to the chateau, to the nearest village, which was named Pointville, and distant from the chateau some three miles. It was a post town, but of no importance, as it had no staple manufacture. It had its corn exchange, and could boast of its mechanics' institute, and it was also adorned with a lunatic asylum of some note in the medical profession.

At Dr. Landelle's asylum for those who were mentally afflicted, many astonishing cures had been effected by a system of kindness, which had quite supplanted the old-fashioned reign of terror.

Leonard frequently walked into the village to call upon either the parson, the lawyer, the local physician, or Dr. Landelle; with all he was a welcome guest, wine and cigars were placed before him, and an hour or so would pass in agreeable conversation, or in that insignificant village chit-chat which is, however, so interesting to those living on the spot.

He was within a quarter of a mile of the Doctor's house, which was situated at that extremity of the village nearest the chateau, when he saw a man running at a good pace along the road, pursued by three others. Watching the unusual chase for some minutes with great interest, Leonard beheld the hunted man hit his foot against a big stone which lay in the road, fall heavily forward, and roll into a ditch, where he remained motionless.

Presently the men came up, raised the fallen one, and placing him between them, caused him to walk, or rather stagger back to Pointville, the third man bringing

up the rear, as if he feared a further attempt at escape on the part of the pursued.

Raising his voice, Leonard called to this man, who, recognizing the young squire from the chateau, said something to his companion, and turned back, while they proceeded on their way with their captive; as the man approached, Leonard saw that he was a keeper employed by Dr. Landelle, and the truth dawned upon him, a lunatic had escaped, and these men had followed him until his accident made him fall an easy prey into their hands.

"Let us walk back to the village together," exclaimed Leonard, returning the keeper's salutation. "Running is hot work, and I daresay you will not refuse a glass of wine, when we come to an estaminet; going along you shall give me the history of the madman, whom you were following up so closely just now. I am morbidly curious enough to take an interest in the misfortunes of my fellow creatures. There was something in the general appearance and form of this unfortunate which reminded me of an old friend."

"The story is rather a curious one, Monsieur," replied the keeper, "we have had him nearly two months. It was about five o'clock on a Friday, the weather had been dark and lowering, and the wind getting up towards evening kept the rain off. I was in the porter's lodge, when I thought I heard some one trying to ring the bell. Going out with a lantern, I was sure I heard a groan, and looking down at my feet, I saw a man huddled up in a heap. With the assistance of the porter, I took him into the house, and laid him down on the floor of the surgery, for the first time remarking that he was covered with blood, which, on examination, we found flowed from a wound at the back of the neck."

Leonard Chetwode started, and became instantly grave.

"Well, sir, Dr. Landelle came in and dressed the wound. The man's clothes were changed, and we put him to bed. In the pockets we found only a portemonnaie, which contained the large sum of three hundred and odd pounds in notes and gold; but not a scrap of

paper or a card which enabled us to form some idea as to his identity."

"When he got well, did he not tell you?" asked Leonard, who was fearfully pale.

"That is the most remarkable part of the story, Monsieur," rejoined the keeper, "the wound I must tell you, was evidently inflicted with a gun, and the man had a narrow escape from death. The theory of suicide was a plausible one, but it is difficult to say how he could injure himself in such a way from behind. The wound happily was not a severe one; the shot not having lodged in the vertebræ, but its effect has been peculiar. The man's brain has become partially paralysed, he has lost his memory, and cannot tell who he is, or how he met with his accident. It is wonderful how he could have dragged himself the long way he did before he reached the asylum, for the next day I followed his blood tracks, up to some land of Sir Simon's near the wood."

Leonard trembled.

"He must have some sense left," he remarked "or he would remain perfectly passive. How do you account for his attempting to escape to-day?"

"Ah! that is a sort of instinct with him," replied the keeper; "whenever there is a chance of getting out, he never neglects it, and he always runs along the road to the Chateau D'Asnieres. Once we caught him at the lodge gates."

"Extraordinary," said Leonard, upon whom this strange communication produced a marked effect. "I must see Dr. Landelle, and hear his opinion respecting this peculiar patient. It is the most romantic story I ever heard."

They were now outside an estaminet, which they entered, Leonard not disdaining to drink with his more humble companion, who, having emptied a bottle of red wine, and wiped the stain from his lips with his sleeve, went on to the asylum, leaving Leonard to follow.

The latter walked through the house, and sank into a seat in a shady arbour in the garden, glad to be alone with his own thoughts, if only for a brief space. For

some time he remained plunged in profound melancholy, after which he rose with the air of a man who has nerved himself to go through an ordeal of a most trying nature.

Nodding to the laudlord, as he passed the bar, he threw down a five franc piece, to pay for the wine he had ordered, and without staying to pick up the change, went on to Dr. Landelle's house, was admitted, and found the doctor walking in his garden, talking in a friendly way to some patients of the better sort who were allowed their liberty.

He was busily engaged in explaining the difference between a rose and a cabbage, to a young, sandy-haired man, who seemed to have his doubts upon the subject, when Leonard came up. The doctor finished his botanical lecture, and taking the arm of his friend walked away, down the spacious garden, saying "How do, Chetwode? It is a pleasure to me to meet a rational being once in a way. That poor fellow I have been talking to, does not know the difference between an artichoke, and a turnip radish. Well, and what brought you here?"

"Nothing, but a wish to enjoy your society, for half-an-hour," answered Leonard, "though now I am here, I should like to ask you a few questions about that remarkable case you have here, the fellow who crawled up to the gate, shot in the neck, and whose brain is affected, though he has otherwise recovered from the ill effects of his wound."

"Oh! the wounded man, a Frenchman, I remember well," replied the doctor; "that is one of the most curious cases I have ever had under my notice, though it is by no means uncommon for the brain to be injured through an injury to the spine."

"Permanently?"

"It is difficult to say. I never had anything of the sort under my notice before, and I cannot speak positively, though I may tell you, that I hope to be able to effect a cure in that man in less than six months. You may laugh at me, but I shall try, at all events, and if I succeed it will be a feather in my cap, as you may imagine."

"I know you to be a clever man, doctor, and I do not see why this case should be beyond your skill," said Leonard. "But tell me now, suppose, you restore that man to his seven senses, and make him altogether as good as he was before he received that shot in his neck, will he be to all intents and purposes the same man?"

"I apprehend so. He will be able to take his proper position in society, whatever that may be, when I have cured him, if under Providence I may be instrumental in so doing."

"For instance," pursued Leonard, "would a jury credit him on his oath?"

"Why not?" queried the doctor, regarding him earnestly.

"I mean, would a jury believe him, were he testifying to some alleged occurrence, which happened before he met with his—his accident."

"Counsel might try to throw discredit upon such evidence, and undoubtedly the mere fact of his having been an inmate of a lunatic asylum would go greatly against him, I have no doubt. For even the best of us are, unhappily, not free from prejudice. Oh, yes, I should be inclined to say that in a court of law, all that he said would be open to a certain amount of suspicion, unless strongly corroborated by others."

Leonard's face brightened. The intelligence seemed to remove a great weight from his mind, and he conversed freely upon other subjects.

At the bottom of the garden was a small building, standing by itself: this was the convalescent ward. The man in charge of it touched his cap as Dr. Landelle approached, and the latter asked Leonard to come in and go over it. "I want to see the patient of whom we have been talking," he said.

"Thank you, I have no wish whatever to see him," answered Leonard, drawing back. "I am to some extent a disciple of Victor Hugo, and human misery in any shape afflicts me."

"Monsieur, come in with me," exclaimed the doctor, who would take no refusal.

Leonard would have resisted, but he could not do so

with a good grace, and with strong disinclination he followed the doctor into the building. In the sitting-room, which was supplied with books, papers, and a piano, he found several men, who were watched by a warder, always in their midst.

Sitting in an arm chair, was a man who continually put his hand to his forehead, and bent his eyes upon the ground, as if trying to recollect something.

‘That is our friend,’ observed the doctor, pointing him out.

Leonard’s eyes turned in that direction, and became instantly fixed. He saw one whom he knew, slightly altered, perhaps a little paler, and wanting the expression which formerly animated his astute face, but still the Comte Davignon.

The mystery was now cleared up. Leonard Chetwode had not killed his enemy when he delivered the cowardly shot in the wood. His wound was a severe one, but he had been able the same day, as we have seen, to crawl to the village, obtain admission at the first house he came to, and get himself placed under the fostering care of Dr. Landelle. It was useless to trifle with the position. Leonard did not attempt to do so, he walked with the doctor to the chair in which the patient was sitting, and touched him on the shoulder, anxious to see if any power of recognition remained to him.

The Comte Davignon looked up on being touched, and his eyes met those of Leonard. A shiver convulsed his frame. His features became distorted with rage, and rising quickly, he threw himself with all his strength upon him, clutching his throat with his long, wiry fingers, and striving with might and main to strangle him, while his breath came thick and fast, and his eyes threatened to start from their sockets, and he uttered inarticulate cries like those a wild beast.

Seizing a whistle, which he always carried for such emergencies as the present, Dr. Landelle blew it loudly, and three warders rushed to the rescue from different parts of the building. Their united efforts sufficed to tear the count away from his prey, who was quickly invested with a straight waistcoat, and cast panting

and howling upon the floor, the other lunatics looking on with excitement and astonishment.

Black in the face and scarcely able to breathe, bearing the black finger-marks of the count's death-like grip upon his throat, Leonard stood, swaying to and fro like a poplar in a storm.

Some brandy and water was given him, and he was led out into the cool air. It was some time before he was sufficiently recovered to speak.

"There, you are better now. It is nothing. I have been served in the same way by some of my patients, who when the fit is on them are not answerable for their actions, though I must say the one who broke out in this way, has grossly deceived me, I fancied him convalescent, and did not imagine for a moment that he would be guilty of such conduct, because I have never observed anything which would lead me to suspect such a tendency in him."

"Of course," said Leonard, conjuring up the ghost of a smile. "I acquit you, doctor, of any wish to have me strangled, but I do beg that you will on a future occasion, refrain from taking me amongst your dangerous lunatics."

"It's very odd," remarked Dr. Landelle, thoughtfully. "The case is assuming a peculiarly perplexing aspect, let me persuade you to take a little more brandy, you are a cup too low."

Leonard did not require pressing to do this, he drank the proffered cordial eagerly, and feeling invigorated, shortly afterwards took his leave of the worthy doctor, enjoining upon him the necessity of keeping a firm watch over his unruly and dangerous patient.

He walked home marvelling greatly at what the day had brought forth. Count Davignou was alive, although his faculties were, for the present, hopelessly obscured. Dr. Landelle expressed himself confident of being able to cure him before long, if so, a new danger would arise. Leonard knew the doctor to be a thoroughly honest, and reliable man, who could not be tampered with. If he could say to him, "Keep that man for ever in your charge, and I will pay you for doing so," he would have

nothing to fear from him. This course was impracticable with such a conscientious gentleman as Dr. Landelle.

If, on the other hand, in six or twelve months, Count Davignon was discharged from the lunatic asylum perfectly sane, and looking back upon the past as a hideous dream, only remembering his attempted assassination in the wood and burning for revenge, Leonard's position would be the reverse of pleasant.

For the present, he was safe. There was no chance of the Count's recovery being sudden. It must be a work of time, and for some months at least, Leonard could plot and plan to his satisfaction.

It was with a much lighter heart than he had enjoyed for a long time past that he entered the chateau, that grand, old home of his father.

He was glad that his hands were not stained with the blood of a fellow creature. It was agreeable to think that he was not actually a murderer, and that his little fit of unreflecting passion was not attended with fatal consequences.

His affianced bride met him at the door, and he imprinted a loving kiss on her lips, saying, "Dear Mac you are the sunshine of my life."

But his heart misgave him as he spoke, and he already in fancy saw the clouds gathering from afar which would obscure his horizon and shut out this pleasant sunshine, which was so sweet to bask in.

Leonard Chetwode's melancholy grew upon him, and a week after the occurrence we have narrated, he left his home, and after his departure two notes were received, one by his father, the other by Mac. Their tenor was the same. The wretched man owned his crime, stated where Davignon was to be found, and said he intended to go abroad to see if he could find peace.

Sir Simon Chetwode was much grieved at this communication, but Scatterbrain, to whom he showed it, comforted him with a hope that Leonard would come back in a short time, and that the Count Davignon would be induced to forgive him for the injury he had inflicted, when his convalescence was complete.

News soon came, however, that Leonard was drowned

at sea, and the old man was bowed down with a fresh grief.

Scatterbrain was a frequent visitor at Asnieres, but this deplorable occurrence gave him a temporary distaste for France, and he left for England, where he again met Lady Jane Vavasour, who was staying with her relative, the Earl of Mount Athol, at his town house.

No news, up to this time, had been received of Susan Knight, and Mr. Graham, when questioned, denied any knowledge of her.

CHAPTER LXI.

A MYSTERY.

JACK FULFORD, who was still Scatterbrain's inseparable companion, came to him one day, and said, "I picked up a letter accidentally, which has, I think, let me into a secret about Lady Jane Vavasour, which she would give the world to have kept in darkness."

"A secret about Lady Jane," repeated Scatterbrain.

"Yes. I will not tell you anything yet, in case I may be wrong, but in order to satisfy my suspicions I will go this morning to a house near Edgware, and there I expect to get confirmation of my doubts."

"Let me accompany you," said Scatterbrain, whose curiosity was aroused.

"Certainly, if you would like to," replied Jack Fulford. "Indeed, I shall be glad of your society. For if I did not take an interest in you I should not bother myself at all about the matter."

"How so?"

"You seem very much taken with her ladyship, and I should not like to see you contract a marriage of which you might afterwards repent."

Scatterbrain whistled.

"That is grave," he said.

Then he wrung his companion's hand, adding, "You are a true friend, Jack "

"I hope so," was the reply. "But come, let us get a cab, and go to Edgware."

In vain Scatterbrain racked his brain to know what Jack Fulford could mean. He was obliged to wait. They went in a hansom to an old house, near Finchley, at which Fulford applied for admittance, which was granted, the door being opened by an Italian. Jack had requested Scatterbrain to wait in the cab, outside, which he did for two weary hours.

As his friend did not make his appearance he got out of the cab and knocked at the door, inquiring for the gentleman who had accompanied him, and whom he saw enter the house.

The servant replied that he had left by the back entrance, and had been gone some time. This Scatterbrain refused to believe, and requested admittance that he might search the house. This was refused, the servant retreated, locked the door, and left the applicant standing by himself.

Taking up a stone Scatterbrain hurled it through a window. Almost immediately a bullet whistled past his ear, which so alarmed him that he resolved to go back to town and consult the Earl of Mount Athol and, if necessary, the police.

The Earl was much astonished, and recommended that a detective should be employed. Scatterbrain had once met a police officer named Drake, at Scotland Yard, where he addressed a letter requesting his presence, and the Earl despatched it by one of his servants.

Mount Athol asked Scatterbrain to stay dinner, an invitation which he accepted. Their speculations as to the secret Fulford had discovered, and as to his fate, were as numerous as they were fruitless.

While they were waiting the preparations for dinner, and sitting in the drawing-room, Lady Jane Vavasour entered, she looked very lovely, and was most becomingly dressed.

Scatterbrain had always admired her more than Florence, or even Susie Knight, and though both the

Earl of Mount Athol and Lord Scatterbrain were very anxious, and fully occupied with their own thoughts, they could not resist the fascination of the Lady Jane Vavasour's society. No one ever could when she wished to put forth her strength, and did so to the best of her ability. There was a charm in her manner when she chose to lay herself out for approbation, which carried all before it.

Scatterbrain had lately met Lady Jane in more than one crowded and fashionable drawing-room, during the London season; he had seen men introduced, and heard her pointed out by men he knew, as the haughty and cold Lady Vavasour, upon whose heart no one could make an impression, and she had always, as we know, been an object of interest to him.

He could not help admiring her, and the more he looked at her lovely face and peerless figure, the more his admiration grew.

Lady Jane perceived this, and as it was her object to make a favourable impression on Scatterbrain she was glad to notice his susceptibility, and did all she could to fan the flame, which, with a woman's keenness and perception, she saw was beginning to burn in his heart.

She even went so far as to unbend, and smile upon him, talk to him, give him open encouragement to pay his addresses should he be so disposed, and listened to his every-day stories, with a complacency which would have charmed the heart of the most exacting anecdote relater.

Scatterbrain, at the expiration of an hour, declared to himself that he had never in the whole course of his experience, which had been somewhat varied, ever met so interesting and captivating a woman before. If she was stern and cold to others, he could not accuse her of being either one or the other to him, her eyes seemed to beam upon him, and she paid him delicate and ingeniously veiled compliments which delighted him beyond measure.

He was unable to disguise from himself the fact, that his friend Jack Fulford, whose mysterious fate perplexed him, had told him that he ought to be careful with

the Lady Jane. Nevertheless, when in love, men do not stop to consider. Scatterbrain thought himself justified in endeavouring to make as favourable an impression as possible upon the titled heiress.

He drank a few glasses of wine at the Earl's solicitation, which increased his amorous ardour, and to his astonishment he found himself making violent love to the Lady Jane.

The Earl had ordered dinner to be got ready as quickly as might be, as he wished to start with Scatterbrain for the lonely house on the road to Edgeware as soon as Abel Drake, the detective, made his appearance from Scotland Yard. But four and five o'clock came without any announcement of dinner or Abel Drake, and what was more remarkable was, that neither of the gentlemen seemed to take any notice of the lateness of the hour. Delighted to see his loved and petted niece in such excellent spirits, the Earl hung upon her voice with as much pleasure as did the Irish peer.

"This is very pleasant," exclaimed the Earl of Mount Athol, stretching his legs out before the fire, and drinking his third glass of dry Amontillado sherry. "I almost wish I had not to go out."

"Have you to go far?" asked Jane, affecting interest in the intended journey. "I hope it is not far uncle, as I dread a return of your influenza, which may be brought about by these cold nights and wild winds."

"Oh! no, not far," said the Earl, thinking this a favourable opportunity to test her sincerity. "We are going to pay a visit to a house on the road to Edgeware."

Having said this he gazed steadfastly at her, but did not remark the slightest trace of agitation on her countenance, which was possessed and tranquil.

"That is indeed a strange journey," she answered. "You will, however, take the brougham I presume, and if you are not very late, I shall not scold you."

There was not the least curiosity expressed to know where they were going. She was supremely indifferent as to the nature of their visit. It might be business, it might be pleasure, she cared as little for one as she did for the other, and turned the conversation with a

skill which did her talent for intrigue great credit. The Earl of Mount Athol was more puzzled than ever, and he was glad when dinner was at length announced. Scatterbrain apologised for not having dressed, and Lady Jane Vavasour assured him that as he looked so well as he was, she would gladly dispense with a compliance with strict etiquette.

He sat opposite Lady Jane at dinner, and she recommended to his attention some Cyprus wine, which the Earl was very fond of, he drank some, but he remarked that she persistently refused to drink anything but water. During dinner she laboured to be polite and attentive to her guest, who thought that he was making great strides of progress in his courtship. If he had not been so vain and confident of his own powers and attractions, his common sense would have told him that no woman, unless she was an inveterate flirt, would have encouraged him as the Lady Jane had done. A clever man would have at once suspected that her civility was dictated by a deep and sinister design, cherished by her at the bottom of her heart. Scatterbrain, however, did not regard it in this light, he thought that he had made a legitimate conquest, and was proud of his powers beyond measure. After dinner Lady Jane rose and said, "However much I might wish to enjoy your very agreeable society, Lord Scatterbrain, I must, in obedience to the customs of society, allow you—shall I say an hour—to enjoy your wine and cigars, at the expiration of that time, I hope to have the pleasure of seeing you in the drawing-room."

Scatterbrain was delighted with this fresh proof of the Lady Jane's predilection for his company, and when she had quitted the apartment, he exclaimed, "'Pon my word your niece is as amiable as she is lovely; you are very lucky, my Lord, in having such a ward as the Lady Jane."

"Many think so," replied the Earl, with a sly smile. "But I am bound to confess that you have made more impression on her in a few hours than most men have done in years. Still, I don't know that you were right to try, without being aware of my sentiments on the subject."

"I hope I have done nothing that a gentleman ought not to have done," hastily answered Scatterbrain; "if I have incurred your displeasure, my lord, I—I—take the earliest opportunity of apologising. I was under the impression that you would allow your niece to choose for herself, and that if she preferred—"

"Yourself, eh!" interrupted the Earl, "well, I do not know that I should say her nay, after all, that which I have most at heart, is the child's happiness. She has money and rank. So I shall see and say nothing."

Scatterbrain thanked his lordship lavishly for his good nature, and, indulging one of those after-dinner reveries, which are as rosy-hued as the wine we drink, he already fancied himself the accepted suitor of the Lady Jane. Victorious, where all others had been defeated, the happy conqueror of her heart.

Both the Earl and himself felt very drowsy. They yawned and stretched their limbs in the vain effort to keep awake. They had drank the Cyprus wine, which her ladyship had pressed upon their attention, which they would not have done, had they seen her pour a subtle mixture into it, before dinner, which was as sure to produce a lethargic condition, as a plague spot is to bring about death.

Gradually the narcotic overcame them, and they sank to sleep. The footman came in with coffee at the appointed time, but did not attempt to wake them. For five hours they slept heavily, and Scatterbrain was the first to rouse himself, he looked about him with a heavy, drowsy air, and was astonished to find that it was nearly twelve o'clock. Replacing his watch in his fob, he woke the Earl by repeated shakings.

"Eh! what!" cried the latter, springing up. "Have I been asleep. It is something unusual for me. What's o'clock? Has that fellow Drake come? Bless me we shall be all behind-hand."

"I am afraid we shall do nothing to-night," answered Scatterbrain. "It is close upon twelve. We must have been drugged. In no other way can I account for so long and profound a slumber."

An expression of annoyance crossed the Earl's face,

as he pulled the bell violently. The domestic, to whose charge he had entrusted the letter for the detective, answered the summons.

"What answer did you get to my letter, James?" asked the Earl.

"None has yet arrived, my lord," replied the man, who thought it best to tell the truth at once. "My lady met me with the note, and taking it from me, said she would deliver it herself. She did not go out, however, till after dinner, when she ordered a cab, and she has not yet returned."

Telling the footman that he might go, the Earl turned to Scatterbrain, and exclaimed "It is as clear as daylight, Jane *must* have overheard our conversation, comprehended the nature of our plans, and defeated our object for this day at least. The wine, as you surmised, was drugged, and while we slept she has doubtless been warning her friends or confederates."

"Yes," said Scatterbrain, with a crest-fallen air, "we have been outwitted, and cannot hope to do anything until to-morrow, which I regret, because a day may be of the utmost advantage to the enemy. They may have time to conceal the—the body."

"Don't, for heaven's sake suggest anything so dreadful," rejoined the Earl, "meanwhile my niece may be foolish, but I will answer for it, she would not league herself with criminals. Besides, what would her object be? No! no. I cannot think that any serious harm has happened to poor Jack Fulford."

"I sincerely hope not. However, we must, in future, be upon our guard. I suppose there is nothing for it now, but to go to bed and wait until to-morrow. I will, if you approve of the plan, go back to my hotel, give orders that I am to be called early in the morning, proceed to Scotland Yard, find out Drake, and bring him here with me."

"Do so, and accept my thanks," answered the Earl.

Soon afterwards, Scatterbrain took his leave, and went to his hotel, he was clever enough to see that he had been played with by a clever woman, but his unquenchable admiration for Lady Jane led him to forgive her, and his

overweening vanity induced him to believe that she had some little kind feeling for him. He did not abandon the hope, of some day effecting the conquest of her obdurate heart, and he sank to rest, building castles in the air, and indulging extravagant hopes for the future.

At seven o'clock, he was out of the house, and proceeded to Scotland Yard. He enquired for Drake, who was not there; but he obtained his address, and went to his lodgings, which were in Westminster. The detective had gone out, the servant said, adding, "He generally takes a walk in the morning before breakfast, and you will find him in St. James's Park, by the side of the water." Thither he went, leaving his cab outside the gates. Near the Suspension Bridge he discovered Drake feeding the water-fowl with bread. He wore a ferocious air, but looked up brightly when accosted by Scatterbrain, whom he remember waiting upon on the occasion of some trifling robbery at an Hotel.

"Do you recollect me?" enquired Scatterbrain.

"Certainly, my lord. I never forget a face. Were I to do so I should be unfit for the position I hold. You were at Long's Hotel, where I was sent for on business. I gave you my name in case you should want me at any time, and I suppose the time has come."

"Quite right, Drake, it has come; and if you are not engaged particularly, I shall enlist your services, and promise you a handsome reward for your trouble."

"Of that I am satisfied, my lord, though I only want what is fair and right. As to being engaged, I have always something in hand, and I came out here this morning to think over a large gold robbery that has been committed in the city. I fancied I had got a clue as you came up, for I found, on the scene of action, a scrap of half-burnt paper, with which a man had evidently lighted his pipe; it contained the name Fanny in a woman's handwriting, and was probably the signature to a letter. I happened to think of a well-known woman in Spitalfields, named Fanny, and if I can prove it to be her handwriting, I shall come to the conclusion that the robbery was committed by the gang she belongs to, and shall have little difficulty in arresting the lot, and bring-

ing it home to them. But that has nothing to do with you, and I beg your pardon, my lord, for taking up your time so uselessly."

"Jump into my cab, which is outside, and I will explain to you the nature of the difficulty which perplexes the Earl of Mount Athol and myself. It partakes of the character of a family secret, but I suppose you are to be trusted."

"I should hope so, my lord. Why, you would be astonished if you knew the matters that are placed in our hands at times. If I was to publish all that had come to my knowledge, numbers would never show their faces again in society. Oh! yes, you may place confidence in me," replied Drake, with pardonable pride.

In about a quarter of an hour, detective Abel Drake was thoroughly well posted up in all the details of the mystery, as far as they were yet known to the relater, and he confessed himself at a loss to give any explanation of so extraordinary a story.

"It's about the most curious case, my lord, that has ever come under my notice," he said, after Scatterbrain had finished his recital, "and I have seen a few strange things in my life-time as you may imagine. Here's a young lady, handsome, titled, rich, having everything any reasonable being could wish for at her command, mixing herself up in an intrigue, the tangled skein of which will give us some trouble to unravel, or I am mistaken.

They now reached the mansion of the Earl of Mount Athol who was anxiously expecting them. He told Scatterbrain that after his departure, he waited up until the return of the Lady Jane whom, he questioned, exercising a guardian's right to do so.

In replying to his question, she informed him that, finding he and his friend were asleep, and trying to wake them in vain, she dressed herself and went to the opera, having previously received an invitation from the Countess Montessor, who was a friend of the family.

The Earl and Scatterbrain knew this was not true, but it was impossible to contradict it without an interview with Lady Montessor, and the matter was of so little

consequence that they dismissed it from their memories, and at once entered into a conversation with Drake.

"We must proceed without loss of time to the house in the lane, my lord," said the detective; "and I presume your authority, as a justice of the peace, will be sufficient for us to make a violent entry, should it be necessary."

"I should think so. At all events I will run the risk of that," replied the Earl.

The cab that Scatterbrain had hired, being a four-wheeled one, was retained, as his lordship did not wish to take his own carriage or servants on an expedition which would give them an opportunity of gossiping, probably to his prejudice.

Just as they were about to start, to their amazement, Jack Fulford, looking very pale, turned the corner of the street and walked up the steps. He stared at Drake, shook hands with the Earl of Mount Athol and Scatterbrain, requesting the favour of a private interview with the former at once.

It was promptly granted.

"Be jabers, it's meself that's proud to see you again, safe and sound in the land of the living," exclaimed Scatterbrain, warmly.

Jack Fulford smiled faintly, and passed in to the private study of the Earl, who preceded him.

CHAPTER LXII.

THE EXPLANATION OF THE MYSTERY.

"Now, sir," exclaimed the Earl of Mount Athol, shutting his study door, "what is the nature of your business."

"I have discovered a secret, affecting the honour and position of Lady Jane Vavasour," replied Jack Fulford.

"Indeed."

"And I think it my duty to make you acquainted with the circumstances."

"I shall be glad to hear you," replied the Earl.

"I accidentally met a man named Parkington," began Jack Fulford, "and he one night confided to me that he was married to a lady of title."

The Earl started.

"His mother kept a fashionable boarding school," continued Fulford, "and it was there that he won the affection of a young lady?"

"And she was—"

"Lady Jane Vavasour."

"Good heaven!" exclaimed the Earl of Mount Athol, drawing a long breath. "Then you mean to say that my niece was secretly married to this fellow?"

"I do. He has long preyed upon her, and she, to oblige him to keep the secret, has given him money."

"That accounts for the frequent, and heavy demands she has made upon my purse. Go on Sir."

"Lady Jane has, moreover, visited this man at his house, which is some distance out of town. To satisfy my suspicions I have followed her, and caught them together. At first Parkington threatened my life, and refused to allow me to leave the house. Hence the alarm of my friend Scatterbrain, and my prolonged absence. I contrived to escape this morning, and I felt it to be my imperative duty to make you acquainted with the facts of the case."

"Sir, I thank you deeply," replied the Earl; "I will question my niece, and see what is best to be done in this melancholy matter. In the meantime I trust I may depend upon your strictly keeping a secret which involves the honour of my family."

"Certainly," promptly answered Jack Fulford; "I would not for the world utter a syllable which would affect you, or the Lady Jane in any way whatever."

"Thank you again," said the Earl of Mount Athol, who was deeply affected.

Jack, after a little further conversation, quitted the apartment, and the Earl, after rewarding Drake, told him his services would not be further required.

The singular communication made to him by Fulford, astonished him, and yet there was nothing improbable in the story.

The son of a designing school-mistress had won the affection of a girl under her care, and they had been married.

A divorce could be obtained, because she was under age, and had married without the consent of her duly and legally appointed and constituted guardians. But the scandal would be enormous.

Scatterbrain's curiosity was great, but Jack refused to gratify it, saying, "The Earl has bound me to secrecy. If he chooses to enlighten you, he must do so, but do not ask me any questions, there's a good fellow, I cannot answer them."

So Scatterbrain was forced to restrain his impatience, and as some races, in the north, in which he took an interest, were coming off, they started that evening together, and went by the mail to Doncaster. When he left Jack Fulford, the Earl sought Lady Jane Vavasour, and taxed the haughty beauty with her fault.

She fell on her knees, confessed everything, blaming herself for not having done so before.

"Oh!" she said, "how much happier I should have been, if I had been candid with you. You do not know—cannot know the heavy weight, that has oppressed my heart. If it is true as that dreadful man says, that he is my husband, I suppose I must continue to obey him as I have done hitherto, but oh! the hatred with which he has filled my heart, almost kills me, everytime he calls me into his presence."

"My poor, dear child," murmured the Earl.

"But I will fly away," she continued sadly, "now that my shame is discovered. Lord Scatterbrain shall never know how I have loved him, and struggled with my feelings. I love him now, but he shall never—never know it. I should make my shame cling to his title and name, and I am not worthy of his affection."

In vain the Earl endeavoured to combat this resolution of Lady Jane Vavasour.

She burst into a torrent of tears, and went into her chamber, where she locked herself in.

Late that night she stole away from the house, with her maid Rachel. The Earl had always been liberal to her in money matters, and her purse was well lined with gold.

She took a ticket for Paris, and got into a carriage just as the train was starting. To her intense dismay seated opposite to her, she beheld Jasper Parkington, her husband, and his odious mother.

Without much difficulty the fellow contrived to extract from her all that had happened. He had expected it, when Jack Fulford escaped from the lonely house, for he knew that he had fancied their secret and would in all likelihood communicate with the Earl.

Parkington now proceeded to establish a fresh hold upon Lady Jane's terrors.

During the early part of their miserable union she had borne a child, which was taken from her, and she was told that it was dead; but Parkington during that journey to Paris, informed her that her child lived.

"You have a duty to perform as a mother," he exclaimed, "and I will hand the child over to you. When that is done you must give me a certain sum of money, and I will go America."

"You will trouble me no more?" she said.

"I swear I will not," he replied emphatically.

Satisfied with this promise, Lady Jane gave him her address in Paris—that is to say, she told him the name of the hotel she intended to stay at, and the man tormented her no more.

On board the steamboat, Lady Jane and Rachel entered the ladies' cabin, and at Calais they procured a carriage to themselves, so that the remainder of the journey was performed in a more pleasant manner than the beginning had been.

Jasper Parkington was her fate.

Go where she would, he followed her, and she could not avoid him. If he would take her money and go to America, she might hope for peace. But only then.

She was indeed making a sacrifice, which in its cruel and harrowing intensity, threatened utterly to destroy her delicate nervous organisation and drive her mad, but happily she was sustained, even in the depths of her profound misery, by a firm trust in Providence. Her only consolation was, that she was doing her duty in a noble and magnanimous manner, and that she was at the same time showing her sincere and everlasting love for Lord Scatterbrain.

Often and often in the silent watches of the cheerless night, she would wake up and find her cheeks stained with the tears that flowed while she slept. Often would she throw out her arms to press the phantom of him she loved to her yearning and almost broken heart.

But it might not be.

She had a duty to perform, and nobly did she go through the self-appointed ordeal. One word from her would cause Lord Scatterbrain to fly to her side. One word would bring him kneeling at her feet, kissing the hem of her garment, and calling her the mistress of his heart—the angel of his earthly pilgrimage.

No power in this world, however, could persuade her to utter the little monosyllable which would make her a loved wife and a happy mother. She was fully determined that the man who loved her to distraction, and was prepared in the fulness of this marvellous affection to make every sacrifice for her, should blot her out of his heart, if possible ; and admitting at last she could never be his, if she had chosen, she could take the necessary steps to annul and set aside her unfortunate marriage, but she rejoiced that he would be free to ally himself with one who would bring no reproach on his noble and ancient name.

A stigma rested on the house of the Earl of Mount Athol. She was responsible for this, though she was the innocent cause. All the reparation she could make should be made. She would live dead to the world. Her friends who had treated her so kindly should never see her. The life of a recluse should be hers, and in process of time she hoped that Scatterbrain would forget her.

She did not know the devotion of that single-minded and lion-hearted man. It was fully as great as her own. He, too, could endure and suffer, ay, and drag on a weary existence to the bitter end.

The heaviest cross of all she had to bear was occasioned by the knowledge that her child lived, and that the wretch who once called her wife was about to bring the girl, now nearly six years old, to her, to be a constant reproach and to remind her perpetually that she had, when young and foolish, been entrapped into union with a designing scoundrel, who would, perhaps, persecute her to her dying day.

She had, as we have said, given Jasper Parkington the address of the hotel at which she intended to stay in Paris. He allowed a long time to elapse before he called upon her. It was nearly ten days after that terrible meeting in the railway carriage, and anyone less worldly wise, less innocent and inexperienced in the ways of men of the world, would have at once suspected that there was no child in existence, and that he found some difficulty in getting one. But she never indulged such a thought. She believed his tale implicitly, and longed for the ordeal to be over. Willing to give him the thousand pounds she had promised, she eagerly looked forward to the time when he would present the child, claim the money, and leave her alone with the pledge of a momentary affection—the offspring of an unconsidered passion, which she had long—long ago repented in sackcloth and ashes.

Jasper Parkington drove up to the hotel with his mother, and alighted with a fair-haired child in his arms, she was nearly six years old, and had a bad, wicked, vicious face. If she was indeed the child of Lady Jane and Jasper Parkington, she partook much more largely of her father's disposition than she did of her mother's. She was quick in her movements, and her eyes, which were gray, like those of a cat, roved all over the room. Lady Jane glanced at her, and turned away disappointed.

"This is our child," exclaimed Jasper Parkington, directly he had entered the apartment occupied by

Lady Jane, and in which Rachel was sitting doing some needlework ; "she has been out at nurse, and did not know, until a few days back, that the worthy people with whom she was living were not her mother and father."

"What is her name?" demanded Lady Jane, in a stony voice.

"We christened her Estelle," answered Jasper, "and she may be Estelle Parkington, or Estelle anything you like. What is the family name of the Scatterbrain family? It is for you to choose."

Lady Jane Vavasour shuddered.

"Is this the child you want to place in my charge," she said, "and you tell me sacredly that she is—is ours."

"I'll swear it on the Bible, if you like," he answered.

"No, no, that is unnecessary," hastily exclaimed Lady Jane.

"If you declare that this is my child, I have no power to contradict you, at all events I accept the charge ; come here Estelle."

The child, without any timidity, approached at once, and stood at her feet. She took one of her hands in hers and said—

"Do you think you can learn to love me Estelle?"

The child answered, "Perhaps, if you are kind I shall, try."

"Where has she lived hitherto?" queried Lady Jane, looking at Jasper.

"In the South of England, I have been over to fetch her ; she is a good child, and you are sure to love her for her own if not for my sake."

He laughed coarsely as he spoke.

A look of unutterable loathing took possession of Lady Jane Vavasour's face, telling him more eloquently than words could have done, that she execrated him in her heart, and she was merely dealing with him as she would with any other man on a matter of business.

"Understand once for all Jasper Parkington," she said. "That all is over with us for ever, if we meet again, which God in his mercy forbid, we do so as strangers and enemies."

"I don't know so much about that my lady," remarked Mrs. Parkington with a cunning smile.

"Silence, woman," said Lady Jane, angrily, while an admonitory look from her son told her that she would act foolishly if she did not hold her peace.

"Give me my money," replied the man, sulkily. "I won't trouble you any more when I've got that. You'll undertake to mind the child, and I suppose you'll let me know occasionally how she gets on?"

"No word or line of mine will ever reach you, Jasper Parkington," said Jane firmly. "You have made a bargain with me, of which you have very much the best, and to which I have only been induced to consent, because I have been urged thereto by a sense of duty, though I am not now the silly, pliable child I was when you first knew me. The world has imparted some of its knowledge to me."

Going to a desk, richly inlaid with mother of pearl and gold which she had brought from England with her, she took a bundle of notes therefrom, and counting them scrupulously, handed them to Jasper.

"Do not think," she observed, "that I am to be intimidated into giving you any more when you shall have spent this in vice and dissipation. If you do and you come to me, wherever I may be, you will be grievously disappointed, for I shall not give you a shilling, and as you have no claim upon me I shall do all that the law will allow me to punish you for endeavouring to extort money under false pretences."

"It will be time enough to do that when we meet again. *Now* it is wasting your breath to threaten me," replied Jasper.

"Not so, I know your cowardly disposition, and I am persuaded that the only rule you would recognise is one of terror. No, Jasper Parkington, I am not wasting my breath to talk to you, far from it. Every word I have uttered has sank deep into your coward heart."

"You are not very complimentary," he said, induced to be insolent now that he had got what he wanted.

"I am truthful," she rejoined, adding. "Have you aught else to say to me?"

"I don't know that I have," he answered, after a moment's consideration. "Yes, there is one thing Jeannie," he added, adopting a tone of familiarity, and exhibiting a tenderness which might or might not have been foreign to his nature and disposition. "You're a deal finer girl now than you were when we first met, and I think it's a pity we can't square up our difference in some way or another; I'd work for you, I don't want to live upon you. Oh! no, nothing of the sort."

Lady Jane Vavasour stood like a statue, unable to answer him; she was speechless with indignation.

"I was your first lover, Jeannie," the fellow went on, emboldened by her silence, and thinking that she was softening towards him. "Your first love, think of that. There is always something in a first attachment. Come! say the word and I'll forgive you for wanting to marry the lord. You thought I'd stand it, and you will not be to blame."

"Begone!" almost shrieked Lady Jane, her voice sounding hoarse and discordant.

"You need not put yourself out, because I've drawn in a little bit," said Jasper, warmly. "The lord won't have you that's evident, or you would not be travelling about in these parts by yourself, or with only a servant girl."

"Who are you calling out of her proper name, if you please," interfered Rachel, passionately. "I'd have you to know that I am my lady's confidential companion, and none of your servant girls."

Without noticing this ebullition of temper and pardonable pride on the part of honest Rachel Barclay, Jasper went on. "You might go farther and fare worse than me Jeannie. I've been unfortunate, I own it to my shame, but it was mother's fault."

"What is that you say?" cried Mrs. Parkington, whose ire was roused at the insinuation. "You unthankful, unnatural rascal! dare to say anything against me and I'll let the lady know all about—"

"You fiend," exclaimed Jasper, springing forward, seizing her by the arm, and squeezing it till the woman winced again with the pain he occasioned her. "That

just shows your spirit, you have brought all our misfortune upon us. If you utter one word more I'll strangle you."

Mrs. Parkington, looked in his face, which wore a murderous expression, and retreated to a corner of the room, near the door, where she stood glaring at her undutiful son, and rubbing her arm where he had pinched it.

By this time Lady Jane Vavasour had recovered herself sufficiently to speak, and she answered, with as much calmness as she could command. "When I said that all was at an end between us you should have had discernment enough to see the gulf which separates us. It is not merely incompatibility of tastes and disposition, or a difference in position. It's fierce undying hatred and repulsion which nothing can ever bridge over. Go sir, and never trouble me with your presence again."

The dignity of her demeanour and the majesty with which she spoke completely awed Jasper Parkington, who saw that there was no prospect at present if at all, of a reconciliation between him and the lovely creature who was once his child wife.

Muttering something which could not be distinguished, he turned on his heel, buttoning his coat over his pocket which contained the notes he had just received, and pushing his mother out of the room before him, went away without saying a word to the child who had accompanied him thither, and of which he represented himself to be the father.

When the mother and son were gone, and the door had closed behind them, Rachel's pent up indignation burst forth.

"The impertinent vagabone," she exclaimed, "did any one hear the likes of him, but I flatter myself, I gave him a setting down he won't forget in a hurry. I'd have done more so, if it had not been for dear mistress's sweet sake."

"Hush, Rachel," said Lady Jane in a low tone, "we have much to bear in this world, one should learn to endure patiently, though heaven knows it is hard to do so in some cases."

Saying this she looked towards the child, who had been unfolding the recesses of a cabinet, and was busily engaged in stuffing something into her pockets.

"Come here, Estelle," said her ladyship, "and tell me what you are doing?"

Starting at being detected, the little girl did not move, though she endeavoured to smoothe her frock down so as to hide the effects of what she had been doing.

"They called me Jane at home," she said, "and I hav'nt been doing anything."

"You will be called Estelle now," was the reply, "because it is my will, and it is prettier than Jane. Answer my question. What are you going to do with the things you have concealed in your pocket. I insist upon knowing."

"Sell them to get money. I used to at home," answered the girl, biting her nails.

"That is very wrong, because its stealing, what money you want you shall have, but I cannot allow any bad and wicked ways," said Lady Jane sternly, and yet with an admixture of kindness.

Estelle instantly replaced the things in the cabinet, and coming to Lady Jane, said, "Give me something," she received a franc, and looked curiously at it, at last saying "it's French money; I saw some once in Soho in London, where I lived."

"You must forget all that now Esty," exclaimed Lady Jane, trying to speak lovingly, though her instinct rebelled, "I am your mamma, and you must call me so, we shall be together always, and I shall be very kind to you, if you are good."

The child promised to be affectionate, and to love her new friends, but it was easy to see that she was not of an affectionate disposition, being, in reality, unusually cold and heartless, for a child of her age. She liked display in dress and furniture, was keenly alive to the value of money, and seemed to have no principle whatever. Evidently she had been brought up in a bad school, and with vicious people. She had a good appetite, and approved of what was placed before her. After dinner

gan to read some books, which Lady Jane placed before her, devouring them eagerly. They were of a religious and educational kind. But it did not matter, she would read anything that she could understand, and this was the most promising trait in her not over-admirable character.

In the evening, when she had gone to bed, Jane set for a long time conversing with Rachel.

"I could never love that child," she exclaimed, "there is nothing about her which attracts my sympathies. She repels me. How she must have been neglected; fancy her trying to steal something to sell before she has been half-an-hour in the house. Is it not dreadful."

"It's my opinion she is not your child at all, my lady," answered Rachel.

"Oh! I cannot doubt it. What motive would that man have in deceiving me. Yes, it is my child, but heaven visits my sin very heavily on my head."

Lady Jane Vavasour bent forward, and burying her face in her hands, wept bitterly.

"Don't cry, my lady, don't cry," exclaimed Rachel, endeavouring to comfort her, and wiping her own eyes with the corner of her apron. "If you do, I shall cry too."

Presently they were sobbing together.

The fit did not last long. She recovered herself, and felt that relief which tears so often bring with them to those who are afflicted, and sorely bruised in spirit.

"I am better now, thanks, dear Rachel," she exclaimed; "and I will strive to be strong. It will be a difficult task, yet I will do my duty to my child. We will leave this place as soon as we can, and bury ourselves in some secluded spot in Germany. I saw in a French paper this morning, that there is a little cottage to be let, on the skirts of the Black Forest, near Baden."

"The Black Forest," said Rachel, with a shudder; "oh the very name gives me the trembles. Are there any ghosts there ma'am?"

Lady Jane smiled, and replied. "Not that I am

aware of. It is a lovely spot, as you will aver when you see it. I am a good German scholar, and we should get on well with the natives. But I have not quite decided. My head has been in a whirl all day. I will think, and make up my mind to-morrow. Now to bed Rachel."

Nothing loth, Rachel laid down her work, and lighting two candles, one for herself and one for her mistress, led the way up the grand staircase of the hotel to the bed-rooms which they occupied.

CHAPTER LXIII.

LADY JANE'S DEATH.

"If loving faith, a heart unfeigned,
 Courteous desire and languor sweet,
 And honest will, in gentle fires that meet:
 If error blind, in labyrinth dark contain'd,
 If, on the countenance every thought's explain'd,
 If interrupted sounds, scarce heard,
 Of shame or fear rule every word,
 If with love's violet paleness stain'd,
 If to hold others than ourselves more dear,
 If to lament and sigh for e'er,
 Feeding on grief, on rage, on fear,
 To burn when absent, and to freeze when near,
 Are causes sad, why love hath madness sent,
 Thine is the crime—be mine the punishment."

THESE lines of Petrarch, which lose much force in the translation, sufficiently describe the desolate state of Lady Jane Varasour's heart.

The poor thing experienced the misery of a life blighted by a fault committed in the first morn of early youth. Very diligently had she kept the secret, suffering pangs which tore her heart, and which were unknown to all.

She had mixed with the gayest of the gay, as those

who have diligently perused this book know well, and none knew the bitterness of the Dead Sea fruit, which she had plucked and eaten, but herself.

The day following the visit of Jasper Parkington, saw her absorbed in thought. It was dangerous for her to remain in Paris, because she continually ran the risk of meeting some of her old friends, who would acquaint the Earl of Monnt Athol with the place of her concealment, and by some means induce her to return to her deserted home.

Being steadfast in her determination, and not in want of money, although she had given Jasper Parkington a large sum, she entered into negotiations with an auctioneer and house agent, for the occupation of a small dwelling, which she had seen advertised near Baden.

"You know, dear Rachel," she said, "that I have what people call accomplishments. When my money is all gone, I shall not be obliged to give in and apply to my friends. I can teach music and English, and make sufficient by my exertions to keep us from starving, at all events."

"Oh, my lady!" exclaimed Rachel Barclay, with generous enthusiasm, "I will work my fingers to the bone, sooner than you should labour for an hour. You, so highly born, so noble, and so good. Oh, it would be a shame and sin if your pretty hands were even to know how hard it is for a woman to earn her bread."

Lady Jane Vavasour's eyes filled with tears at this evidence of the esteem and regard in which she was held by her faithful servant.

"Leave all to me," she said, at length, "I will take care, my good Rachel, that everything shall be done for the best."

The negotiation for the occupation of the house on the skirts of the Black Forest went on by letter, and of necessity took some time. Lady Jane was compelled to remain in Paris, and as she could not stay in the apartments she had hired all day, she was obliged, for the sake of her health, which was in a very precarious condition, to go out occasionally.

During one of her walks in the Luxembourg, she fancied that she saw Lord Scatterbrain, nor was she mistaken. His erratic lordship had again crossed the channel, and was luxuriating in Paris, with Jack Fulford and Mickey Doolan. Jack had conceived a real friendship for Scatterbrain, and did not feel happy out of his society.

As she always wore a thick veil she contrived to escape recognition by his erratic lordship, but she ran a narrow risk of being detected on a later occasion.

She generally dined at a cheap cafe, if she could find one, an obscure restaurant, but one day she penetrated through the Faubourg St. Honore as far as the Palais Royal, and went into a hotel where a *table d'hote* at *prix fixe* was just commencing.

She at once sat down and removed her veil, but scarcely had the soup been placed before her, when she saw, to her horror, Lord Scatterbrain and Jack Fulford enter the room, arm in arm. Fortunately, they sat down at the same side with her, and took places a little higher up the table, so that their attention was not directed to her as it would have been had chance made them sit opposite, although she was in such great trepidation that she could scarce eat any dinner. This accidental meeting was productive of some amusement to her.

The waiter, who spoke a little English, but who was thoroughly wedded to French customs, went round with a pencil and a piece of paper, to take down orders for wine. The regular customers at the table d'hote had their own bottles in various stages of consumption, with a napkin tied round the neck. But Scatterbrain had never been there before, so the waiter stopped by his side, and asked him in French what he wanted to drink.

Scatterbrain thought he wanted to know his name. He had imperfectly understood him at first, and looking at his pencil and paper he fancied that they had an inkling of his rank, and wanted to announce him in some obscure paper as one their patrons.

He looked first at the man and then at the paper and

pencil. There could be no doubt about it. The fellow was tuft-hunting, and Scatterbrain determined that he would not be advertised as one of the patrons of the hotel.

So he exclaimed, uttering the first name he thought of, which was that of his bootmaker in London, "Haynes, Robert H.a.y,n,e,s."

"*Plait il, Monsieur,*" said the waiter.

"Robert Haynes," said Scatterbrain.

"Ah! yars. Bittare ales, Bottled ales sare, ver good."

"Bitter ale, you fool," answered Scatterbrain, "what do you take me for? I'm not a brewer. You might as well call me Mr. Brown Stout."

"Yars, ver good. Burreton, Bass. Yars, sare," replied the grinning waiter, who had not understood a word Scatterbrain said, and fancied he had made a very good hit.

"Look here, Jack," exclaimed Scatterbrain, as the waiter went away still grinning.

"What is it?" asked Jack Fulford, who had been talking violent politics to a German of the Bismarck school, who sat opposite to him.

"If that waiter fellow brings me a bottle of bitter I'll break it over his head."

"What for?"

"When he came round with a pencil and paper to ask my name, I thought I wouldn't gratify their beastly curiosity here, and I told him it was Robert Haynes, that's the man that builds my boots, you know, in town, and he started off in a cheeky sort of way, to get me some bottled ale."

"You'll be the death of me," exclaimed Jack Fulford, laughing; "you make me laugh fit to kill myself at least twice a day."

"What have I done now?" inquired Scatterbrain, who was innocent as a baby of having done anything wrong.

"The waiter did not want to know your name, he was taking orders for wine, and he thought an order for 'Engleesh Betaille,' as they call it, a very natural one."

After this Scatterbrain held his tongue and went on with his soup, but for a long time Jack Fulford would persist, much to his annoyance, in addressing him as Mr. Haynes.

Lady Jane Vavasour reached home without being detected, and breathed a fervent sigh of relief when she found on her arrival at her lodgings, that a letter awaited her from the house-agent, who informed her that she had been accepted as a tenant of the little house on the skirts of the Black Forest, near Baden, and that she might proceed thither as soon as was agreeable to her.

A day sufficed for her to make all preparations, and in four and twenty hours, she, with Rachel and the child, had started for her new home, but fate had ordained that she should never reach it.

The train in which she travelled met with an accident of a most peculiar nature. The coupling irons of the last carriage broke in a tunnel, and in this carriage were Lady Jane Vavasour, the child Estelle, and Rachel.

A luggage train following the passenger, rather too quickly ran into the derelict carriage before the travellers could extricate themselves from their dangerous position, and the result was a shocking loss of life. But two passengers escaped with their lives, and they were dreadfully injured.

When assistance was brought it was found that Lady Jane Vavasour, the child, and Rachel were quite dead. Documents found upon them made the work of identification an easy one, and the sad news was telegraphed to England.

The Earl of Mount Athol had deeply mourned the absence of Lady Jane, whom he would willingly have forgiven for the sin of her early youth.

When the news of her death reached him, he was terribly grieved. At first he disbelieved the announcement, and despatched his steward to France, to the scene of the accident, to verify the truth of the report.

The man returned with the dead bodies, which would have convinced the most incredulous, and the Earl, ordering a splendid funeral, followed Lady Jane to the

family vault, and shed bitter tears as he stood by her coffin during the reading of the service for the Burial of the Dead.

CHAPTER LXIV

KING LAMBTON FALLS IN LOVE.

THE Earl of Mount Athol felt Lady Jane's death acutely, and longed for someone to fill up the void in his heart.

An unexpected opportunity offered, which he did not neglect.

Mrs. Shuttleworth, Florence Grey's aunt, was on her death-bed ; sending for her old friend the Earl of Mount Athol, she entreated him, with tears in her eyes, to accept the guardianship of Florence.

He gladly consented.

Florence came up to town with him, and her intimacy with Lambton Leroy was renewed.

Lord Scatterbrain and Jack Fulford had gone abroad again, some said they were in Turkey, some said they were in Persia, no one knew exactly where they were.

Lambton Leroy made love to Florence, and the Earl permitted his addresses. For a long time was poor Lady Jane Vavasour mourned sincerely by those who had known her well. But some months passed, and the melancholy event was almost forgotten with pleasurable anticipation of one of a totally different nature—namely, Florence's approaching marriage with Mr. Lambton Leroy, who had adopted the profession of a surgeon.

They had long been acquainted with one another ; as we know, the Earl of Mount Athol thought he could safely confide his ward's happiness into Lambton Leroy's hands.

Latterly, reports had reached him that Leroy did not

apply himself to business with his former assiduity. He smoked more than usual, and his face was often flushed, as if from the effects of drink.

He had renewed his acquaintance with Mr. Graham, who insinuated himself into the young man's confidence, the result of which was a dangerous intimacy.

Though severe in his appearance, and formal in his manner, Mr. Graham was anything but a desirable companion for a young man who had to work for his living.

Lambton Leroy's patients were frequently neglected. He visited billiard-rooms in the morning, and sometimes spent the whole day there.

The Earl once surprised him in the act of making a heavy bet upon a game he was playing, and this was before one o'clock in the day.

He said nothing until he met him at his own house, when he remonstrated with him, and informed him that he could never think of sacrificing his ward's happiness.

"In what way, sir, is the sacrifice to be consummated?" enquired Lambton Leroy.

"By entrusting her to a man who indulges in gambling and dissipation," returned the Earl, sternly.

"I am old enough to be my own master, and I shall follow the bent of my own inclination," said Leroy.

"Very well. Let us look upon that declaration as final."

"In what way?"

"I shall be much gratified when your visits at my house cease altogether."

"They shall cease from this moment," retorted Lambton Leroy, striding towards the door.

"I will communicate your decision to Florence," said the Earl.

"If you please," replied Lambton Leroy, stopping short, "be good enough to tell her that you are the cause of the cancelling of the engagement."

"Not the primary cause."

"That is a quibble," said Lambton Leroy. "Perhaps you will think better of it when you have considered the matter." Adding rudely, "You make a great mistake my Lord, if you suppose your ward singular in her

good looks, or imagine that she is the only eligible match in London."

"Leave my house sir!" shouted the Earl of Mount Athol, who was scarcely able to articulate through anger.

When Lambton Leroy reached the street, he was sorry for what had passed. He was scarcely sober at the time, or he would never have spoken so imprudently to the guardian of the girl he really loved.

Returning to his house, he began to blame himself for his folly, and sitting down, penned a contrite epistle, in which he stated that he was not sober at the time, having drank heavily the night before, and he trusted the Earl would pardon and look over his conduct.

To which the Earl responded very briefly, saying, "Your want of sobriety is no palliation of your outrageous behaviour, but rather an aggravation of it. I shall lay your letter before Florence, and I trust it will assist me materially in opening her eyes to the real nature of your character."

When this reply arrived Lambton Leroy became more furious than ever. His friend Mr. Graham came in at the critical moment.

"You are disturbed," he said.

"A little," was the hesitating reply,

"Why try and disguise it from me? I can see it plainly."

"Well, there shall be no disguise. I will make you my confidant," said Lambton Leroy.

"It is unnecessary. I already know the cause of your perturbation. You have had a stormy interview with Athol. He has forbidden you the house, and you are disconsolate because you think the ward can never be yours."

"By Jove!" ejaculated Leroy, "you are a witch or a wizard! That is a true account of what has happened!"

"And now you want to know what I think of it all?"

"I certainly should value your opinion considerably."

"It is well that your engagement is broken off. You

will have more time on your hands to make your fortune. You must turn your attention to the turf and the Stock Exchange, and with the little capital you have to start with, you will soon realize a fortune."

"I would I could think so," mused Lambton Leroy.

Mr. Graham did not recur to the subject that day, although he did on future and equally favourable occasions.

He persuaded his dupe that he would come possessed of colossal sums of money, and he at last yielded.

As a matter of course, being young and inexperienced, he lost on almost every occasion, soon tired out his friends, and became reduced to the condition of a beggar.

His practice, once flourishing, fell off, and he made scarcely enough to live upon. Mr. Graham supplied him with cash at various times, but at length said that his means would not permit him to do so any more.

"But I must have money," exclaimed the infatuated young man. "I care not where it comes from, or how I get it, but money I must and I will have."

Graham affected to consider for a brief space.

"I think I have it," he cried.

"Have what?" asked Leroy, looking up gloomily.

"An idea which will relieve you from your difficulties."

"I shall be very much indebted to you if—"

"Hear me out first: you may not be disposed to make use of the mode I shall point out to you. It is not one of which I altogether approve."

"Let me have it," said Lambton Leroy, impatiently.

"Well, my idea is simply this, and if it is distasteful to you, do not blame me for propounding it."

"Certainly not. You do so at my earnest solicitation, and to blame you would be unjust in the extreme."

"Very well. I shall have a considerable sum in my possession shortly, but at present the source from which I expect to derive it is not available. My bankers, however will cash bills on my recommendation."

"My bills!" cried Lambton Leroy, laughing contemptuously; "why, my good fellow, there isn't a Jew in

London who would discount my paper at ninety per cent."

"You are too hasty," replied Mr. Graham; "I am speaking of something totally different. Write some name on the stamp—any name will do; say Lockwood and Co., the West India merchants. I will take it to my bank, where it will be kept snug and quiet, and get the money."

"That is forgery!" said Lambton Leroy.

"Of course it is. Why mince the matter? But it is a way of getting money, which you want very badly. I do not know what will become of you unless you do."

"If it had not been for those speculations——"

"It is useless to repine. All you want is an accession of funds to go on with. You must win in the long run. Luck can't always be against you; and your judgment is by this time matured."

"There is something in that," said Lambton Leroy, whose vanity was flattered by this artful and designing speech, and in whose breast the slumbering spark of hope was fiercely fanned.

"You are sure that you will be in a position to give me the money?" he added.

"As sure as Antonio was of the arrival of his ships when he was bound to Shylock."

"But Antonio's ships did not arrive in time."

"Mine will," answered Graham, decidedly.

After some more conversation, a stamp was produced, and Lambton Leroy deliberately forged the name of Lockwood and Co., West India merchants, to a bill of exchange for £500, at three months.

Mr. Graham snatched it from him as if fearful that he might alter his mind, be seized with a twinge of conscience, and tear it up.

Placing it in his pocket-book, he rose, and taking his leave, said, "You shall have the money, if all goes well, in the course of the day."

"Very many thanks," replied Leroy; "you are my best friend, Graham. Do you know, I often wonder what makes you take such an interest in me?"

Graham smiled in a peculiar manner.

"Be content to look upon me as a bud," he replied, "which will ripen and expand beneath the sun of our acquaintance."

"A strange fellow, that," thought Leroy, when he went away; "he has, however, been most useful to me on many occasions. Besides, he has shown me a little life."

Mr. Graham returned in the afternoon with the money, less fifty pounds for discount, which was equal to ten per cent. Leroy thought nothing of that. He went out with Graham; they dined together; went to the opera; and separated at a late hour.

Leroy had lately been thinking a great deal about Florence, and thought, with justice, that he had treated her badly. He had lived in such a whirl of excitement, that he had had little time for reflection.

It was not so with Florence. She, poor child, took his behaviour very much to heart. She loved him with a pure, self-sacrificing, trusting love, and she fancied her guardian to blame for hastily dismissing her lover.

It was her opinion that she could have reclaimed him had she been allowed to make the effort.

"Oh," she said, one day to the Earl; "if you had only allowed me to marry him! I know that he loves me, and that his eyes will be opened when his dream of folly is over! You do not know the power a young wife has over her husband."

"But he has turned out a scapegrace," replied the Earl of Mount Athol.

"No matter! I would gladly run the risk of——"

"Peace, child!" cried the Earl. "You are young, and have no sense. Your books may have given you a theoretical knowledge of the world and of mankind; but practically you know nothing."

With this reply, Florence was forced to be content. Many a tear did she shed in secret! many a sigh, irrepressible in public, found an echo in her guardian's heart.

Lambton Leroy was restless that night. He could not sleep. His brain was feverishly excited from the effects of deep potations and high play.

His lodgings were not far from the Earl's house, and he replaced the latch-key in his pocket, even after he had put it in the lock of the door, and changing his mind, thought he would take a walk round the square before he retired to rest.

He looked up at Florence's windows, and saw a light in them. It was a fierce light, as if several candles were alight.

"She has been to a ball," thought he; "and she is thinking over what has been said to her. I wonder if she has obtained another lover. She is good and lovey enough to deserve a score."

Then he heaved a deep sigh, and, walking away, sat down in the shadow of a door-porch, musing over the events of the past six months.

A still, small voice upbraided him for his conduct generally; and hinted that he would have been in a much better position had he never met Mr. Graham.

It also said—this still, small voice with the persuasive tongue—that the knowledge of the world, upon which he prided himself, was bad, and that he would be better without it.

It went on to say that serious consequences might arise from his act that day, and that more depended on Mr. Graham's finding the money at the proper time than he dreamt of.

Presently he fell into a sort of doze. His dreams were horrible, and he woke with a start, fancying the car of Juggernaut was rolling slowly over him, causing him to suffer excruciating agonies.

Jumping up, he was almost deafened by the noise made by a fire-engine, which went past at a spanking rate.

"A fire somewhere," he muttered, rubbing his eyes with his knuckles. "I've been to sleep; how stupid of me! I'll go and see the fire. It may wake me up a little."

A cab was passing by, and he hailed it. It pulled up near the kerb. Jumping in, he cried, "Drive to the fire?"

"Yes, sir," replied the cabman, and off they went in the wake of the fire-engine.

What was his surprise and astonishment to see the fire-engine pull up at the Earl's house, which was enveloped in a mass of flames.

A crowd had already collected, and the few policemen on the spot were doing their best to keep order.

"Bless me," said Lambton Leroy, "that light I saw upstairs must have been the fire. I am getting silly as well as older."

In the centre of the crowd was an old man, with gray hair, which fluttered in the breeze uncovered.

He was talking most animatedly to the firemen.

"Do, please," he said, "direct your hose at that window. My ward is there! No one has roused her! She will be burnt to death! What shall I do?—what shall I do?"

He uttered the last words in a most piteous voice. The fireman replied civilly enough, and said that the fire-escape and other ladders would soon be on the spot.

An immense volume of water was at first thrown on the flames, but all at once the supply failed. Whether the mains were ill supplied or not, it was impossible to say. Something stopped the current, and from that moment the greedy flames had all its own way.

Lambton Leroy comprehended everything in an instant. His beloved was in the burning building. If not already in the chill embrace of death, she speedily would be.

He was afraid that the fireman, in the absence of a proper supply of water, would scarcely be able to force their way into the house.

The Earl of Mount Athol caught sight of him.

"Oh, Mr. Leroy," he cried, "will you save my child? I am old and feeble, and they will not let me move!"

This was true enough. He was in the grasp of a policeman, who thought it his imperative duty to restrain him.

"I will do my best," replied King Lambton.

"Do, for the love of heaven, do!" said the old man. "You professed to love her once. Save her, and I forget and forgive all. She shall be yours!"

Thus encouraged, Lambton Leroy determined to make an effort. But he did nothing rashly.

Beckoning to his cab, he jumped in, and was driven at speed to his lodgings.

"Coward!—dastardly coward!" vociferated the old man. "He has deserted us!"

He was, however, mistaken. Lambton Leroy entered his little surgery, and possessed himself of a large india-rubber bag, filled with some vapour. This he placed under his arm, returning with all speed to the scene of the catastrophe.

The escape and the ladder had now arrived. Fireman after fireman ascended, but though they penetrated the house, the flames inside were so fierce that they could not stay.

One by one they descended, burnt, half suffocated, crestfallen. The crowd was now very large. The spacious square was full of people, and it was with difficulty that Lambton Leroy could make his way to the scene of action.

When he did, he lost no time in speaking to the captain of the fire brigade.

"I wish to make an attempt to save a young lady who is in the building," he said.

"In God's name, make it!" returned the captain, without further parley. "I, in conjunction with my best men, have made the essay, but we have been foiled."

Grasping the Earl's hand, he wrung it heartily, and ascended the ladder, amidst the cheers of the populace, who wondered what on earth he carried under his arm.

He darted through the flames, and effected a footing in the blazing mansion. The room was full of fire and smoke, but untying the neck of his bag, he caused it to emit some subtle vapour which utterly extinguished every spark in less than a minute.

He then looked around him! he could see no trace of Florence. She must have left her own room, in the effort to escape, and have fallen down before the smoke either in a corridor, or in an adjoining apartment.

Pushing on, he entered another room, where flames and smoke again met him. More vapour from the bag subdued the former, and he groped about the room on his hands and knees for the body of his beloved,

For some time his exertions were unrewarded.

His bag was now empty, and the magic vapour which had befriended him was of no use in any further effort.

The flames would soon push in from the passage, and resume their former sway.

Suddenly his hand came in contact with something solid. He felt the soft flesh of a human being. It must be Florence.

Taking it up, all unconscious as it was, he bore it into the first apartment, at the window of which the ladder was, and reached the aperture just in time.

As he placed his foot upon the ladder, with the inanimate body of the fair girl closely encircled by his strong right arm, a terrible crash was heard.

The roof had fallen in.

Another moment, and he would have been too late; both he and Florence would have been buried in the smoking ruins.

A tremendous shout broke from the spectators who witnessed his act of gallantry.

All was as light as day, and his figure, supporting the body of Florence Grey, was distinctly visible.

When he reached the ground, Florence—for it was she—was taken from him by sympathising hands, and carried into a neighbouring house.

She was not burnt, though she had been half stifled by the dense and suffocating smoke.

At length the water flowed again freely from the main, and the fire was in course of time extinguished, but not before the house had been completely gutted.

The Earl was full of gratitude to Lambton Leroy; he was the saviour of his ward, and he could not find words to thank him for the inestimable service he had rendered him.

"There is one question, though, I wish to ask you," he said.

"I know what it is," replied Leroy, smiling, "You

want to know how I faced the flames when the firemen could not?"

"That is it."

"I will tell you. I was making some experiments the other day with sulphuric ether, and found that a gas generated by it, and mixed with other gases, would extinguish any flame. Having triumphed on a small scale, I resolved to try it on a large one."

"You were successful, for which we must be thankful to Providence," replied the Earl. "I thank you most warmly for what you have done, and adhere to my promise. Florence is yours."

Florence was only too pleased to make up the difference, which was not one of her seeking, existing between herself and Lambton Leroy.

At length the bill became due, and Mr. Graham, with much apparent regret, informed Lambton Leroy that he feared he should not be able to scrape quite sufficient together to take it up.

"What shall I do?" said Leroy. "If the forgery is discovered, I shall be ruined."

"We must take care that it is not found out," replied Mr. Graham.

"Can you not advise me?"

"Yes; to the best of my poor ability. I can manage about three hundred. That is very much at your service. And the Earl has money."

"Oh, yes; but he will not lend it," answered Leroy, shaking his head.

"I did not mean that he should do anything of the sort."

"What then?"

"Help yourself to it," said Graham.

"Steal it?" ejaculated Lambton Leroy, with horror.

"The wise don't say stealing—they call it conveying, if ancient *Pistol* is to be credited," Graham replied, smiling sardonically. "Pluck up a little courage, and when you go to make love to the ward, relieve the guardian of some of his superfluous wealth."

Although this idea had been distasteful to Lambton Leroy at first, he gradually became reconciled to it, and

agreed to make up the requisite sum in the way suggested by his friend.

No sooner was this arranged, than Mr. Graham wrote a mysterious note to the Earl warning him that Lambton Leroy meant to rob him, and advising him to watch him closely.

The letter aroused all the Earl of Mount Athol's old suspicions, and he refrained from showing it to Leroy, wishing to see if he were correctly informed.

Lambton Leroy found that the Earl kept a considerable sum of gold and notes in a writing-case in his study.

Thither he stole one evening between the lights. A strong knife enabled him to wrench open the lid.

The glittering prize was displayed before him. There was much more than the £200 he wanted.

"In for a lamb, why not for a sheep?" he muttered, and appropriated the whole.

But scarcely had he secured the plunder in his burglarious grasp, before the Earl stepped forward and placed his hand upon his shoulder.

"This is unworthy of you, young man," he said, in a broken voice, and with tears in his eyes.

He was pained, because he had saved his ward's life, and he owed him a debt of gratitude. He would rather have lost half his fortune than have discovered him to be a thief.

"My lord!" cried Lambton Leroy, thunderstruck, and dropping the money.

"Pick up the dross," replied the old man; "you want it, or you would not have jeopardized your good name for it. Take it with you."

"No, no; it is all a mistake," stammered Leroy.

The old man shook his head.

"A joke, sir, believe me; it is all a joke. I made a bet that——"

"Young man," interrupted the Earl, "you have sinned before heaven. Do not aggravate your offence by telling a lie. Go."

"I——"

"Not a word. Take the gold or leave it, as you like, but go."

With his head hanging down, and wearing the aspect of a whipped hound, Lambton Leroy stole from the room, and left the money.

He found Mr. Graham waiting for him. The events of the evening were quickly detailed, and Leroy seemed completely prostrated.

"Cheer up, man!" cried Graham.

"How can I? I am ruined."

"Not a bit of it. No man is ever ruined while he has his health and his liberty."

"How long I may retain the latter I can calculate exactly," replied Leroy, with a groan.

"What do you mean?"

"The bill——"

"Bother the bill," exclaimed Graham. "I will tell you how all may yet be well."

"If you can you are a wonderful fellow," replied Leroy, who had unbounded faith in Graham's words.

His face began to brighten up a little.

"Take the three hundred pounds I have," began Graham; "then make every preparation for your departure."

"Where from?"

"Here. With that money you can buy a small practice somewhere—let us say in Devonshire."

"But Florence? You have forgotten Florence."

"Not a bit of it," answered Graham. "Florence shall go with you."

"Come, that is going a little too far. How on earth is that to be managed?" said Lambton Leroy, becoming sceptical.

"Easily enough. She loves you. Write her a note, asking her to meet you to-night. Talk to her! tell her you have had a disagreement with her guardian. Hint that you saved her life. Say your future happiness is at stake, and finally propose an elopement."

Springing from his chair, Lambton Leroy slapped his friend on the back, and exclaimed, "You are a grand fellow. I look upon you as something like a friend."

"Mine is good advice, I grant you! but there is nothing wonderful about it," replied Graham. "By absconding to-night, and taking another name in the provinces, you will never be traced. You can practise your profession, marry Florence and lead a happy life.

"The picture you draw is enchanting."

Taking a pen and ink, Leroy wrote at once to Florence, entreating her to meet him at the corner of the Square. She was sufficiently romantic to consent to do so.

He had been walking up and down impatiently for a short time, enveloped in a thick great coat, for the evening was chilly.

A delicate figure stole up to him unobserved in the half-light, and pronounced his name in a soft voice.

The next instant she was clasped in his arms.

"My darling!" he cried, "how can I thank you?"

"I could refuse you nothing," she murmured.

"Nothing?"

"Oh, no! Did you not save my life?"

"And would again, were it to occur a thousand times over; but, since you say you could refuse me nothing, I am emboldened to speak freely. I have offended your guardian."

"Again," said Florence.

"Unhappily, yes. Now what I have to propose is, that you and I take independent action in the matter. The Earl has a regard for me, and if we go away to-morrow, and get married before the registrar, he will in a week or two forgive us, and all will go marry as a marriage bell."

"Oh! it is not kind of you to propose such a thing," said Florence.

"I cannot live like this," replied Leroy; "love like mine will not brook delay."

"But my duty?"

"Place that on one side. Trust me, all will be well in a short time. You said you could not refuse me anything."

"Nor will I," hastily replied Florence. "My resolve is taken; meet me here to-morrow, at nine in the

morning ; we will go before the registrar, and—and—— pray heaven I am doing no wrong.”

“Believe me, to be candid, you are not. Kiss me, dearest. Adieu. At nine to-morrow.”

They were duly married. The ceremony was perfectly legal, Mr. Graham took care of that, he had an interest in it as will be seen.

The elopement of his ward was a great blow to the Earl of Mount Athol. Graham called upon him every day, and told him that he was trying to discover the whereabouts of the runaways. At first the petulant old nobleman would not forgive them, but his health failed him.

Then Graham told him that he could not expect mercy hereafter if he was not merciful on earth.

In the end, the Earl of Mount Athol, with the fear of death before his eyes, forgave Florence and made his will in her favour.

This was what the wily attorney had been working for, he drew up the instrument which made Florence Grey one of the richest heiresses in London.

He knew that his heart was so wrapped in Florence that desertion on her part would kill him. He was a great age. The death of Lady Jane Vavasour had undermined his constitution and rendered him ready to succumb to a second blow.

Having with much cleverness got the old Earl to forgive Florence and leave her all his money, he waited until the doctor declared he could not recover, and then sent for the runaways.

They came in time to receive the Earl's last breath.

Taking Lambton Leroy on one side Graham exclaimed. “I congratulate you.”

“On what?” asked Leroy.

“On the wealth which your wife will inherit.”

“How! has the Earl——”

“He has left her every farthing he had in the world,” answered Graham, complacently.

“Graham,” cried Leroy, seizing his hand. “You are a prince of a fellow. But you have not schemed and plotted to bring this about for nothing.”

"Of course not."

"You will want your share."

"Yes," answered Graham with a peculiar smile.

"How much is there?"

"Half a million of money, a quarter of that sum must be mine."

"So much!"

"I can claim it all, and you dare not refuse me, unless—"

"What," demanded Lambton Leroy, as a horrible suspicion crossed his mind.

"Only this. I hold the bill you forged Lockwood's name to, and could transport you any day," answered Graham, with a smile of triumph.

"You shall have what you want," replied Leroy, quietly.

"Of course I shall. I know that, and now good-bye, I have other things to attend to."

He quitted the house, satisfied with having made a quarter of a million very cleverly in less than twelve months.

"There is nothing like scheming," he muttered, and calling a cab, drove to his office.

Some letters lay on his table, and he opened one bearing a foreign post mark.

"Very well," he exclaimed. "Little Susie is making progress. She has appeared at the Scala, and Signor Gardoni thinks she may now leave Milan and try her luck at the Italian Opera in London. I must see the manager and make arrangements."

Then he opened his other letters, and was soon immersed in business.

Mr. Graham was a truly remarkable man.

CHAPTER LXV

THE NEW STAR.

WHEN Lord Scatterbrain had completed the grand tour, he came back to England, and so polished had he become, that his *alter ego*, Jack Fulford, assured him he could take his place in society without feeling in the least degree nervous or uneasy.

"I told you, Scatterbrain," he said, "soon after I first ran across you, that you had the makings of a good fellow, and what the world calls a "gentleman" in you, and I was not mistaken. If anyone finds fault with you, refer him to me, and I'll——"

"Don't bother yourself," interrupted Scatterbrain. "I can render a good account of a man who so far forgets himself as to chaff another for not being so well educated as himself, never fear, me bhoy."

Scatterbrain established himself in London, but he spent a considerable portion of the year in Ireland. The people in and around Balleyasmashem adored their landlord, who never "raised the rints," without a just cause, or evicted any man from his land from their inability to pay.

During the height of the season he drove Jack Fulford down to Richmond, where they were going to dine.

As they went along the road, Jack said, "I should like, if we have time, to drop in at the opera to-night."

"Why?" said Scatterbrain.

"Because I see a new prima donna advertised to appear."

"Who is she?"

"A Miss Susi Nitreni."

"Curious name," exclaimed Scatterbrain.

They drove on in silence for some time, when Scatterbrain cried, "I say, Jack, does not that sound something like Susan Knight?"

"Well, it does," replied Fulford, after a pause.

"I wonder if that fellow Graham has developed our little friend's musical talents, and is now bringing her out as a star."

"Scarcely likely," replied Jack Fulford, in his cynical way "I don't think she had it in her."

"Don't you? I do," answered Scatterbrain.

They reached Richmond and dined at the Star and Garter. While they were promenading the grounds attached to the hotel, after dinner, they ran up against Mr. Graham, whom they had not seen for a long time. He, too, had been dining at the hotel, and was apparently delighted to see them.

After some conversation, he exclaimed, "What are you going to do to-night?"

"We thought of dropping in at the opera," replied Fulford.

"An excellent idea. Will you come to my box," said Graham.

"With pleasure."

"It is No. 4, on the grand tier."

"We shall not forget it," said Fulford, who accepted the invitation for Scatterbrain and himself.

They passed on, and Mr. Graham entered a private room, through the window.

He joined a lady, elegantly dressed, but the two friends could not see her face.

About ten o'clock they made their appearance at the opera, and were shown into Mr. Graham's box. He was there alone.

The heroine of the opera was singing splendidly, and bringing down the plaudits of the house, as a *débutante*, seldom succeeds in doing.

Scatterbrain was soon busy with his opera glass.

At first he could not believe his eyes. If he was not mistaken, the lady who was charming the *élite* of London fashionable society, was none other than his old friend Susie Knight.

"I say, Graham," he exclaimed, "you have got up a surprise for us."

Graham smiled.

"You recognize an old friend," he said.

"I do indeed. Is not the new prime Donna——"

"Susie? exactly," exclaimed Graham.

Scatterbrain was silent with surprise.

"Yes," pursued the astute attorney, "I saw that she was talented above the average, and I resolved to make her fortune for her. She has been in Italy for the last two years, and she has returned to England, a Syren of Song."

"She has indeed," rejoined Scatterbrain, who was charmed with her singing.

When the opera was over, they went behind the scenes, and Scatterbrain renewed his acquaintance with Susie, who blushed up to the eyes, as she received his praises.

Scatterbrain thought he had never seen anyone so lovely. She had greatly improved since they were last at Lambton Buzzard, and he fell in love with her at first sight, the more so, perhaps, because he had always been prepossessed in her favour.

After this they met frequently and he made love to her openly.

One morning Mr. Graham called upon him at his house, and asked what his intentions were, with regard to the celebrated Signora Suzi Nitreni.

"Honourable, of course. I will marry her, if she will have me," replied Scatterbrain.

"Do you know my lord, that she will be worth £20,000, a year, as long as her voice lasts," said Graham.

"Well."

"Her voice will last, let us say, six years. Most likely double that time, but we will say six years. Six times twenty is a hundred and twenty. That means £120,000."

"Oh!" said Scatterbrain, "If I married her I should not let her remain upon the stage."

"What then would be the advantage to me," said Graham.

"To you?"

"Yes, she has entered into a covenant to sing for me,

when, and where I like, for ten years. I pay her a certain salary to—”

“Farm her, in fact.”

“Exactly so,” answered Mr. Graham.

“In other words, you want £100,000 to give your consent to her marriage.”

“About that. There is an odd item or two, for her education and living, which I will put down at about £10,000. If the two sums are paid me, I will give my permission to her marriage with you.”

“Let me see the lady—that is, Susie, first, and I will give you an answer. I must know whether she will have me, before I can deal with you,” said Scatterbrain.

“By all means,” rejoined Mr. Graham.

“That day Scatterbrain called upon Susie Knight, who was talked about by everybody now. She was as celebrated as the Prime Minister, and her singing was thought more of than even the Irish Church Bill.

He took Jack Fulford with him, and going along told him what Graham had said.

“Take my advice,” replied Jack, “and if you can get the girl to marry you, snap your fingers at Graham. The girl is now of age, and he can not enforce his contract, let him try it in a court of law. Much as he loves his beloved *Nisi Prius*, I will wager he never serves you with a writ, as her husband.”

“Can’t he,” said Scatterbrain.

“Can he? where’s the consideration?”

“He educated her.”

“Pooh! Let him try his action; you will beat him. He has not a leg to stand upon. Take my advice, I say.”

Scatterbrain had great confidence in Jack Fulford’s advice, and he had a long interview with Susan Knight.

The result was, that they were married in a short time privately before the registrar.

Mr Graham was furious, and he threatened them both with pains and penalties, at which they laughed.

Eventually he brought an action against them, but they refused to be intimidated by him, when the case was set

down for hearing, he withdrew the record, thus admitting that he had, as Fulford said, "not a leg to stand upon."

However, Scatterbrain did not behave unhandsomely; he re-embursed the attorney all the money he had expended in educating Susan's voice, and also let him have a fair share of the profits of her operatic career.

He did not remove her from the stage for some years, though he had said he should do so. Susan's heart was wrapped up in the profession she had adopted, and she would have broken it if she could not pour forth her soul in song.

As Lambton Leroy had married Florence, as poor Lady Jane Vavasour was dead, and as Scatterbrain had married the famous Suzi Nitreni, Jack Fulford felt alone in the world, and in sheer desperation proposed to a widow, who rejected him.

This so disgusted him with the fair sex, that he declared he would never marry, and he has kept his word religiously.

As before, he is everybody's favourite, and Scatterbrain would be lost without him, for he has to travel all over the continent with his wife, who sings sometimes in London, sometimes in Paris, Berlin, Copenhagen, Warsaw, Milan, Florence, St. Petersburg and other places, and he finds Jack's common-sense and practical way of going about things a capital set off against the continued blunders of Mickey Doolan whom he retains in his service, in spite of his everlasting blunders.

THE END.

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